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Post-Perspectival Art and Politics in Post-Brexit Britain: (Towards a Holistic Relativism)

Paul O’Kane

At a Parliament Square rally held this summer in the immediate aftermath of the EU Referendum, several noble-minded, well-intentioned liberal speakers called upon the defeated, deflated and hugely disappointed crowd to ‘understand’ those who voted differently to ourselves, and to ‘empathise’ with working-class communities who, since the decline and demise of the New Labour project, have been gradually but comprehensively moved to think, act and vote with and for the centre-Right, hard-Right or far-Right. This political drift is likely to open a widening gap between core, middle class, fine art audiences and those deemed less or least likely to attend fine art events.

So just how *should* we progress, contribute and critique meaningfully within ‘Post-Brexit’ Britain? We may simply have to resign ourselves to living in a country where diverse cultures and classes are no longer destined to meet but only to compete with and confront one another as a hostile (rather than valued) difference. One answer might be to renew and redouble efforts to ‘reach out’, beyond cultural ‘comfort zones’, while deploying the specially flexible conduit of fine art as a means by which to share knowledge, garner understanding and provide alternative viewpoints to those currently peddled by a mostly monstrous mainstream media. Alternatively, fine art and fine artists could acknowledge and accept the diminution of our existing power and position within a transforming socio-political landscape, given the current upsurge of right wing populism and the possible, corresponding decline of the long-standing, modern, bourgeois hegemony (ie the pivotal socio-economic and cultural role *heretofore* played by the middle classes in all modern societies). Fine art and fine artists, if displaced from their existing sense of a legitimate, central and specially empowered perspective, may therefore be required to accept a new role, status and identity as just one culture or subculture among many, within a more complex, more inclusive, less perspectival and hierarchical, more global and more technologically networked version of multiculturalism.

Both art and politics might be described as a collection of perspectives, variously garnered, gleaned and harvested into movements, isms and manifestos; truths, tribes and visions, each promising to rescue us from the ultimate, barely acknowledged but perhaps deep-seated fear that, according to the ‘bigger picture’ of things there may be no ‘perspective’ at all. That precocious critic of modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche, warned us of this unpalatable possibility when he wrote:

... if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world.

It is provocations like this, plus ideas encountered in studying postmodern and post-structural theories, the works of artists – including the poetry of Walt Whitman – that led me to claim that I am, or aspire to be, a ‘holistic relativist’. It sounds lofty, and a little unlikely, but I believe this term encapsulates at least the aims and ideals of many of the best artists and thinkers I have encountered. ‘Holistic Relativism’ might involve the (also Nietzschean) ambition to ‘transvalue values’ and to move, in as much of our thoughts and actions as possible, beyond all judgement, prejudice, hierarchy and perspective.

As we observe, distance and represent ourselves and each other, our prejudices and perspectives are established culturally – by wealth, education, taste and style – but they are also influenced by changing the means with which we perceive. This summer at the West End gallery of Beetles & Huxley, a small but comprehensive show of classic twentieth century photographic studies described Britain’s socio-economic classes. May Ball ‘toffs’, golf club ‘types’ and examples of

poverty that included the merely ‘tasteless’ and the utterly abject variety were all on show, snapped by Martin Parr, Bill Brandt, Richard Billingham and other familiar names. But we might be justified in asserting that no single photograph can or should ever attempt to represent a person, class or culture in the iconic way presented in Beetle & Huxley’s show of ‘classic’ images. The 35mm SLR camera, championed here, has only encouraged us – it could be argued – to see each other frozen and framed in telling tableaux and convenient caricature. In fact there was little there that felt up to speed with Britain circa 2016 in which class relations, influenced by new visual and communications technologies, are shifting apace, throwing up new power brokers and perhaps even redistributing the modern order of classes.

Myriad Posts, MOVs and selfies now contribute to clouds of ‘Big’ but relatively meaningless ‘data’ as social networks enable a relatively a-perspectival exchange of words, images and opinions that tend to emphasise the relativity and fluidity of *all* perspectives. Social networks are, at best, a virtual ‘speakers’ corner’ for the world, where participants encourage a relativist atmosphere and tend to be intolerant of hierarchical behaviour. Fairness and equality are upheld on the internet, not so much as laws enforced by a state, but rather as values we demand of each other as we increasingly police our own communities. Meanwhile, political perspectives have become increasingly unearthly, deterritorialised, and yet simultaneously ‘global’ as online communities encourage us to prioritise the new freedom to articulate increasingly mobile (and therefore perhaps increasingly temporary and arbitrary) political ‘positions’. But despite this new fluidity new nationalisms and right-wing political parties are burgeoning malevolently among so-called ‘leading nations’. This may be a backlash against the loss of more ‘grounded’, localised powers and perspectives that have traditionally anchored our politics and identity. The 1930s are often cited as relevant to today’s political scenario but we could also consider an increased sense of localism and nationalism implicit in the work of Romantic artists, like John Constable or Caspar David Friedrich, whose paintings, in part, responded to the assertive reign of Napoleon’s form of ‘globalisation’.

As well as being capable of transmitting a topical sense of local fear or national pride many artists may demonstrate how to turn subjective observations into objective values. I recently stumbled on a prime example of this special skill in Mark Wallinger’s *Construction Site* (2012) installed at Tate Britain. You may know the piece (recently exhibited at Baltic and in Derry). Projected in HD video, on a wall made to the specifications of the projector’s ‘throw’, you see three horizontal bands – sky, sea and beach. The world is thus simplified as in a child’s painting. The looped video is approximately ninety minutes long, testing our patience but maintaining our attention and curiosity as we observe a team of scaffolders building a construction (always a pleasure to watch others work) that eventually enables them to appear to flatten the earth and even walk along the horizon. Art’s centuries-old investigation of a multi-dimensional world rendered by means of various two-dimensional apparatuses (painting, photography, film, video) is mischievously teased as the scaffold evolves and the depicted scene appears to flatten into its screen. The work enables us to momentarily believe (again like children) that it is possible to climb up and on to a horizon that (so our easily-tricked, relatively innocent eyes lead us to believe) is as close as the surface on which it is represented.¹

Despite all its high definition technology the video camera is a direct descendent of Renaissance optics. However, in Wallinger’s film we gain an accelerated lesson in art history as Alberti’s illusory ‘window’ is gradually closed and supplanted by an undeniable flatness that invokes the kind of self-reflexive formalism associated with modernists like Braque, Mondrian or Greenberg. Once the scaffolders have made it possible for them to appear (again, from *our* perspective) to

¹ Korean artist Yeondoo Jung has made works, involving children’s drawings, photography and video that also play on this idea.

occupy and even walk upon the horizon, they perform a quick ‘high-five’; go for a tea break, then return to take the construction down again. A complex procedure thus seems to have been carried out only to deliver a relatively meaningless punch line, or to pedantically prove a technical point, before an equally purposeless *dis*-assembly ensues and the video loop loops on. What the scaffolders, the artist, and the technology combined appear to have ‘achieved’ however is the momentary cancellation of a distance, and maybe of distance *per se*. All that is different, distant and deferred becomes momentarily present and the same. The horizon is fetched to the fore as there becomes here and far becomes near. The political implication might be that *others* (other people, *other* places) can be rendered immanent to the self and to *this* place. By subverting Renaissance perspective and supplanting it with modernist flatness that which is habitually perceived as distant and different comes to occupy the same time, space, environment, conditions and concerns as we ourselves occupy.



Mark Wallinger, *Construction Site*, 2012

Wallinger’s intriguing artwork almost literally demonstrates the fact that we are responsible for the ‘construction’ of our own ‘sited’ (and of course ‘sighted’) positions and perspectives. Meanwhile art can be seen here to, both technically and symbolically, challenge and change, not only our perspective but also our ways and means of representing our perceptions and of perceiving our representations. Knowing the artist is Mark Wallinger, and seeing the film at this moment of heightened political sensitivity in Britain means that these scaffolders read not only formally but politically, perhaps as migrant workers or as (to use UKIP’s currently favoured term) ‘native’ white working class labourers. Both these social groups have recently been bumped-up the ladder of political priority by manipulative media and exploitative politicians who rarely stress their similarity and near equality (in socio-economic terms) but prefer to present their difference as antagonistic.

David Cameron memorably – and recklessly – used one of his first international speeches as Prime Minister to add his voice to the growing right-wing consensus that ‘multiculturalism is dead’. The new conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, has an opportunity to distinguish herself from Cameron by re-launching multiculturalism in Britain as something which involves, embraces and includes more holistically than ever before even those cultures and subcultures that feel threatened

by the very concept (it's worth recalling here Gordon Brown's destructive 2010 encounter with one Gillian Duffy, and the badly handled, sorry trail leading from that dismal moment all the way to Nigel Farage's current 'triumph'). If so, artists can surely play an important part in this process. However, a few months ago I was struck, like many I am sure, by hearing the words 'white working class' spoken loud and clear, first by Theresa May, the prime minister, on accepting her new role, then by one of her ministers in a radio interview soon after. The fact that the minister also used these words might be mere evidence of sycophantic loyalty but is more likely to be the result of a policy briefing, according to which 'white working class' are destined to become new Tory buzzwords repeatedly laced into forthcoming media *spiel* (just as 'robust', 'transparent' and 'the poor' suddenly became *de rigueur* for the 2010 coalition government.) The phrase 'white working class' is certainly an explicit sign, waved at a crucial political moment, parading the promise that the British Conservative Party will and do represent that part of the population. But these are also words which strike fear – fear of racism, sexism, violence, xenophobia and the mocking of political correction – into that traditional Labour heartland composed of middle-class, urban, liberal, anti-sexist, anti-racist, EU-friendly thinkers, including what we might think of as the core fine art audience.

However, while 'white-working-class' may be fearful words to many liberal, and often middle class artists, they also (like any other all-too-convenient collective terminology) inevitably *misrepresent* and inaccurately homogenise a far more complex and heterogeneous group of *diverse* people. I myself could be described as 'white-working-class'. My skin is appropriately pale, I was born and raised on an Essex council estate, left school at sixteen with just one 'O' Level (Art) and consequently went from dole to factory to dole to building site to dole to factory before going to art college, and only there starting to improve my prospects and change my *milieu*. I continued to labour in (what Marx called) this 'alienated' fashion up until my forties when I first gained more professional and 'respectable' employment in the arts. I have even driven a few white vans in my time, but *not* because I am a racist, sexist, homophobic, lager-drinking England soccer fan but because, at the time, I was an otherwise unemployed, unfunded, yet committed artist who had no support network for my career aims nor any other means of making money. This brief autobiographical detour is not included out of self-pity or self-aggrandisement however but rather to provide an exception to a perceived rule and thus render more complex all and any convenient, presumptuous and prejudicial perspectival-*ism*. I merely aim to counter any simplistic, fearful and homogenising image of the 'white working class' that politicians may currently use and abuse in dangerously manipulative ways, just as we should counter all strategically conjured and falsely collective images of eg 'foreigners', 'refugees', 'immigrants' 'Poles', 'Romanians', etc.

BBC journalists have been competing for audience attention this year as, like many to the left of British politics they appeared appalled by 'Brexit' as an inauspicious outcome of cavalier Tory policy-making. Reporters roamed the British regions in search of anything that might help re-orientate liberal Britain's shaken status, identity and reputation. During one broadcast, labourers could be heard giving answers over supped pints in strong local dialects to slightly leading questions delivered in the presenter's subtly downshifted RP. The replies mainly consisted of clumsily assembled keywords regurgitated from right wing newspaper headlines: 'Asylum Seekers', 'Borders', 'The Tunnel', 'The Jungle', 'East Europeans', 'The NHS', 'Housing', 'Take Back Control' all assailed the veteran journalist, who seemed dumbfounded by just how ill-informed, convoluted, self-contradictory and illogical the responses often were. Even the world-renowned English language has had its proud tradition of wit, nuance and metaphor crushed by crude imagery and bombastic sloganeering (making nonsense of the Right's insistence that migrants must master the 'mother tongue'). What *was* articulated clearly in these voters' voices was evidence that the biggest political and historic decisions in Britain are increasingly based, not on fairly presented, measurably objective facts but on massaged prejudice, manipulated hunch and outright mendacity. These, after all, are the people about whom Iain Duncan Smith and co feel currently

cock-a-hoop for having manipulated into voting Britain out of the EU. The mismatch between the smooth-tongued, shiny suited, privately educated politician and his relatively innocent, inarticulate and, it is fair to say 'ignorant' ballot-box fodder recalled the often cited (in this centenary year) disconnect between World War I generals and their ill-fated foot-soldiers.

I recently challenged my own all-too London-centric perspective by attending the opening of an exhibition at a regional gallery. It happened to be in my own adolescent stomping grounds, part of the country that I tend to avoid just in case it reclaims and reconnects me to my long-disowned roots. But despite my fears, and as one or two friends were involved and train tickets laid on I made my way beyond the city's limits to support fine art in our newly divided nation's neglected regions. Having met the gallerist, viewed the work and chatted a little I found myself, not unusually, defaulting to a quasi-outsider position. Yes, I am not good at parties, and yes, my cultural history may well be to blame, so instead of coolly mingling I retreated to an island of trimmed grass, slightly removed from the social action, about a hundred meters across a pedestrian space that provides the gallery's immediate architectural context. Feeling slightly ashamed for not going against-the-grain of my reclusive nature I was nevertheless able now to view the event from a privileged perspective. There was the gallery – an annexe or adjunct of a recently built university library – and there were the guests, enticed outside by the balmy weather and a huge external video screen thrust out at right angles to the gallery window. The artists, critics and other visitors were strung across the square, stylishly dressed, balancing glasses of wine or microbrewery ale as their body language signalled the quality of their conversation. From this perspective I could still see some of the art too. Part of the show appeared in a gallery window space while a videoed performance looped on the enormous video screen.

As I surveyed the scene from my slightly external perspective I gradually became aware of the unmistakable, slightly threatening sound of 'souped-up' car engines infiltrating the atmosphere. Two vehicles slowly entered the square, purring down the slip road behind me, both variations on a black hatchback, each replete with tinted windows, 'jacked-up' rears and gleaming wheels. The two vehicles, their drivers and other occupants, postured around, revving-up, squealing forward and nudging back by means of little wheel spins. Sitting there, hearing the customised cars screeching behind me, and seeing the artists, gallerists and critics schmoosing in front of me, I glimpsed a mental snapshot of myself poised between two cultures that may be increasingly divergent in 2016 Britain. Shouts, laughter and dance music wafted occasionally out of a wound-down car window and after a few minutes the cars revved-off, leaving a little newly burned rubber on the tarmac and a cloud of pungent blue exhaust fumes hanging in the air.

Growing up in this 'region' I was not entirely untouched by its endemic car culture. Try as you might to distinguish yourself or eschew your local scene it is not easy to survive *any* cultural environment untarnished. There is something about places like this – and not just derived from the aspirations and occupations of the majority of residents but seemingly hard-wired into the very geography – that decrees the car be king. Meanwhile, 'white working class' custom car culture might justifiably be regarded as a form of apotheosis of modern consumerism's own central, hallowed and highly visible elevation of the car. For the sake of the car we fight our dirty oil wars. Some of our most highly paid TV presenters are also associated with car culture, and through advertising and Hollywood movies we are consistently encouraged to maintain our thirst for the car as a form of exemplary commodity, a symbol of status and legitimacy. Meanwhile 'white working class' custom car culture is – as various artists and commentators, including Dave Hickey, Richard Prince and Grayson Perry have acknowledged (and as Jeremy Deller might agree) – a valid culture of a certain class that emerges directly from certain environmental conditions and traditions. The very same description can and should of course be applied to fine art culture, but in the scenario described above 'white working class' custom car culture appears distinguished from, and in subtle

conflict with what might excusably be described as an essentially or predominantly ‘middle class’ fine art culture.

As an artist, writer and lecturer I feel a duty, not only to translate and transmit subjective experience but also, where possible, to offer objective interpretations, diagnoses, prognoses and even propose possible answers to the problems I perceive and the questions that those perceptions seem to raise. For this reason, soon after the event at the ‘regional’ gallery described above, I (informally) contacted the curators and asked if they thought it might be possible for myself and the gallery (perhaps assisted by an appropriate funding organisation) to collaborate in designing and building a skid pan somewhere close by the gallery, perhaps on an empty lot or disused road and on which local custom car fanatics could parade their cars, show off their vehicles and driving skills while blasting out personal playlists, all of which could be filmed from flattering angles and soon-after re-broadcast on the gallery’s huge public HD video screen. By this means some kind of productive cross-cultural synthesis might be achieved (I suggested) and currently intensifying cultural barriers might be broken down as a mutually enhancing inter-class exchange takes place.

So far I have not heard back from the gallery but I remain optimistic that this apparently ill-considered and idealistic inspiration might just be a timely idea, and one with ‘legs’. Yes, it may be easily ironised as a laughably utopian proposition, but is nevertheless an example at least of a way in which many fine art and fine artists may now be thinking as Britain’s organisation of classes appears to morph before our eyes. This is not a time to shrink back into defensive cultural silos, to flee in fear of dramatic change or mindlessly sally forth in hostile and potentially violent confrontations. Instead artists might play a special role in helping guide wider society through unusually challenging times by thoughtfully, artfully, and wittily drawing attention to that ‘bigger picture’ which is humanity’s ultimately shared (holistic, relativist and a-perspectival) context and condition.

Paul O’Kane is an artist, writer and lecturer. He studied BA Fine Art and Art History, then MA Visual Cultures, and completed a doctorate in History at Goldsmiths College, University of London (2009). He is a Lecturer in Fine Art and Critical Studies at Central St Martins College, London and makes and exhibits artworks concerned with a history of technologies and narrative. He writes for leading art journals, including *Art Monthly* and *Third Text* and has published well over a hundred articles, reviews and catalogue essays. He is a founder member of artists’ book publishing company *eeodo* with whom he published *Where Is That Light Now?* (photography and memoir) in 2014. He is a Member of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) and blogs at [ONLY YOU](#)