

## Truant Creativity in the 'Work' of Mike Harte...and Brendan Fahy

Mike Harte is a friend with whom I studied during my undergraduate degree. He was renowned for his struggle to make anything that could be labelled 'work'. What is more, unbeknown to him yet clearly apparent to his fellow students, Mike himself, as well as his struggle, became both the content and product of his output.

During the two years of my postgraduate study, Mike kept in contact. He regularly sent me envelopes filled with newspaper and magazine clippings and other general miscellany that Mike thought would interest me. In total, Mike sent 36 envelopes, each of which is featured in its entirety over the pages of the scrapbook *Mike Harte - Make Art*.

I hope that the upshot of this one-way correspondence was, if nothing else, the development of a pretext for Mike Harte to make art. Of course, he had no idea of this at the time of sending each of these envelopes.

Jamie Shovlin, introduction to *Mike Harte - Make Art*.

As an activity with no obvious formal context in which to define its outcomes, Mike Harte's one-way correspondence with Jamie Shovlin seems not so much a consciously artistic practice as an example of creativity playing truant from art – though Jamie's doormat and the postal routes through which Mike's flamboyant envelopes went their merry way can be considered a context of sorts. The notion of the artwork as something engendered by and representing a relationship between two or more correspondents is of course nothing new, but to lend the informality of private correspondence the stark formality and publicity of gallery/book presentation is surely to risk antagonising that relationship. Unless I have misread him, Jamie's presentational motives seem poised between generosity and curiosity: the altruism of temporarily suspending one's own concerns and taking the time to showcase a friend's world-view is offset by a pensive anticipation as to what, exactly, the world will make of that view.

Despite an evident fascination with the material that comprises this project, Jamie's stewardship of it is characterised by impartiality and authorial invisibility. Sure, he attaches his name to it, but as facilitator rather than 'appropriator': unlike with some of his earlier work (at the ICA and Tate Britain), our appraisal of the gathered material is filtered through no specific epistemological context – other than the cultural radar of a citizen named Mike Harte. And, yes, the author of this text, having seen Jamie's *Lustfaust* at the ICA, has countenanced the possibility that this person may be an apocryphal creation, despite the convincing biographical back story supplied one evening in some wretched *faux*-Mexican pub on Balls Pond Road. It doesn't really matter to me either way: it happens that Jamie's caught me at a particularly 'factitious' moment, and I can think of nothing better than to be willingly enticed into a vindication of an imaginary artist. However, such generosity comes with a considerable rider: I get the chance to write about a friend from *my* past.

The title *Mike Harte - Make Art* sounds less like a description of, or judgement on, something that has already been produced than an exhortation *to* produce. Usually, it is the past that is invoked to evaluate an exhibition's success; as viewers, we make a number of critical judgements that boil down to a single question: What difference does it make? Although the many newspaper clippings that constitute the bulk of Mike's correspondence can be said to document a recent past (that of a nation and that of a citizen of that nation), it is the *future* that hangs over this project, in that our critical judgements boil down to a slightly different question: What difference *will* it make...to Mike? The implication is that the real reason for collating this material into an installation and book has not yet come to pass: as Jamie says, it is 'the development of a pretext...to make art'. Even if it achieves nothing else, *Mike Harte - Make Art* emphasises something we usually overlook: that exhibitions have a tense. Thanks to the ubiquitous and specious use of the word 'contemporary'<sup>1</sup> in visual art,

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, am I alone in noticing that an art form's use of the word 'contemporary' is proportionate to the derision it receives in the popular press? Visual art and dance are the two most derided art forms, and their over-reliance on the word 'contemporary' to emphasise their cutting-edge critical premium is an instinctive defence-mechanism against philistine judgements they see as rooted in the past.

that tense is often assumed to be the present. Well, it's not the case here.

To dwell further on the specific relationship that exists between Jamie and Mike would be unwise, for I've never met Mike and I've only met Jamie once. Of greater interest to me are the comparisons I began to make between Mike and certain of my own friends as Jamie described the events that led to the production of this book and show. When he first told me about the material acquired through his long correspondence with Mike Harte – and of his decision to become its artistic executor – I was reminded of people from my own past: people who, despite a prolific creative output, for one reason or another did not care, or did not know how, to disseminate their 'work' in a formal sense. I thought specifically of one Brendan Fahy, with whom I lived for five years while studying foundation and undergraduate fine art, and who in retrospect, it seems to me, developed a similarly truant creativity to that of Mike Harte. I hope Jamie and Mike will not think it too indulgent if I mention him here at some length. I do so partly by way of purging guilt that I did nothing to encourage this unpolished genius of piss-your-pants-funny drawings, one liners, captions, clippings, epigrams, poems, plays, collages, conceptual stunts and impromptu 'enunciations' on to greater things, and partly because this is probably the only opportunity I shall get to set down some of his exploits on paper.

I'm sure we all have at least one friend who deserves to have an essay written about them, someone whose world-view is at fascinating variance with one's own. In my experience, such friends are not so much men and women as poems that have assumed human form. I've no idea whether Mike Harte is such a person to Jamie Shovlin, but Brendan Fahy certainly was to me. To borrow a phrase from Poe, Brendan was an 'imp of the perverse', his creative impetus being a curiosity as to what would unfold if the most ill-advised course of action were taken. His output straddled the two years we spent together on a foundation course and the three years I spent as an undergraduate in Nottingham – where, despite an unsuccessful application to the same course, Brendan came to live with me. Brendan was an astonishing draughtsman, but had no interest in capitalising on his ability. At the beginning of our foundation course, he would always finish his 5-hour life study in an hour, and spend the rest of the afternoon defacing his work with sundry transgressions – snake tongues, swastikas, cocks – that were even more impeccably executed than the initial study. While, in themselves, these were probably his least interesting creations, it was nevertheless amusing to watch someone ruin his own work as his peers struggled to emulate it. It's not as if Brendan did this every week, but he did it often enough to throw into question how, exactly, 'talent' is to be deployed – and in a context in which the display of talent was regarded as the sole criterion of artistic value.

In fact, it was not through visual work but through text that Brendan made his first significant breakthrough. In a constipated art history essay on Romanticism, he inserted, between two sentences, the word 'Fuck' – specifically, one feels, to test whether or not it would actually be read. It was. Had he written his essay on a word processor, this indiscretion might conceivably have been construed as a cataclysmic, trans-document typo; but the fact that it was handwritten left no room for such lenient interpretation: this was intentional provocation, unprecedented in more than a decade of BTEC National Diploma at Norfolk Institute of Art & Design. The art history tutor took it badly, and Brendan was hauled before Rod Newlands, Senior Lecturer in Foundation Studies, who administered the mildest of rebukes through barely contained laughter. (Much later, the same lecturer, on proofreading Brendan's undergraduate application form and noticing that under the section 'Ambitions' he had written 'gipsy', could not contain that laughter.)

Brendan's subsequent experiments with text bore the more recognisable stamp of experimental literature, encompassing poetry, drama and the epigram. Of this work, his verse – written in an aphorism-lyric style reminiscent of the Ostrobothnian poet Gösta Ågren – was considered his most accomplished. This was his most memorable poem:

The Delightful Sunset

Sun getting lower in the sky.

\*

Delightful.

The separation of the first and second lines, not merely into stanzas but into cantos, is particularly audacious – though I hope my transcription of these words from memory (rather than from the original manuscript, long since lost) has not imparted an inadvertent 'literariness'.

As to Brendan's visual work, the combination of drawing, collage and text that first appeared in the winter of 1989-90 bore no resemblance to anything produced by day under tutorial guidance. Diligent student that I was, I spent the evenings at an easel in my attic room, painting dowdy interiors and pious portraits of my friends, during which endeavours I would sometimes have occasion to reproach Brendan for not following my example and making good use of his prodigious natural ability. One evening, by way of goading Brendan into action, I somewhat foolhardily challenged him to a drawing competition: I proposed that we each repair to a different room in the house and attempt to draw its entire contents in an hour, a challenge he accepted with uncharacteristic zeal. Later, returning from the kitchen with copious charcoal studies of cutlery, appliances and foodstuffs, I asked to see Brendan's work. He handed me a sheet of foolscap paper. On it was a biro sketch of two expressionless characters standing in a park, accompanied by a caption that read: 'Dave and his father play ball in the park. Dave has cancer.'

Brendan's more 'conceptual' pieces, though gauche at first (for a 1991 college project he 'went topical', submitting a pound of lard bearing the inscription 'Death to Saddam, kill him now before he spreads his evil seed'), soon established a more sophisticated rubric, culminating in a 1996 piece for which he cut a picture of an anonymous man out of the local newspaper, framed it, placed it on the mantelpiece, and pretended to his flat mates, for an entire year, that it was his father. Another piece was made in response to a dismal guesthouse in which he and I had stayed on moving to Great Yarmouth to pursue our studies. Our relationship with the landlady, Mrs. Hickman, was fraught from the outset. After a week we had soiled our room with oil paint and tobacco, played music too loudly, woken our host's elderly mother by coming home in the small hours, and cast doubt on the edibility of her cooking. These latter aspersions, usually mumbled *sotto voce* after her husband – who served as waiter – had deposited our dinner on the table and gone back into the kitchen, were one day offered a little prematurely, and far too audibly. An argument ensued, and we were forced to voice the unanimous opinion that Mrs. Hickman's food was not up to much. At which point Mrs. Hickman stormed out of the kitchen and let us have it, giving us notice there and then. Anyway, Brendan's response was to pin a poster on the student notice board advertising an ORIENTAL BAZAAR at 16, North Denes Road – Mrs Hickman's house. We did not bother to verify whether anyone turned up to the bazaar; the appeal of the work was strictly metaphysical.

Why did I allow Brendan to think that such acts were mere frippery, when I knew full well that they had more to do with art than anything I'd seen at the institution where I was studying? Perhaps because I was unsure about how things done solely to amuse friends would withstand public scrutiny, especially given the quotidian context of their execution. Nevertheless, a few years later I discovered David Shrigley's work and thought of what might have been, had Brendan been a little better informed and a little less suspicious of the 'art world'--at which he looked genuinely askance.

But 'informed' was not in Brendan's vocabulary. And this, by way of dragging things back to the matter at hand, appears to be where he and Mike Harte would differ. Where Brendan's deeds were essentially the impromptu actions of a cultural sceptic, Mike's collation of tabloid news clippings into a rolling portrait of the national psyche engages discursively with culture - however unedifying and venal that culture may be. In answer to the question of what difference the public display of his correspondence might make to Mike Harte, surely Arts Council funding will be found to employ him on a permanent basis as Curator of Salient Trivia. Those who hardly ever read the red tops need people like Mike to tell us that a piece of masonry once fell on Vanessa Feltz while 'She was trying to remove the line "Vanessa Feltz has a big hairy mirkin" from a message wall at a Big Breakfast farewell bash'. Somehow, the news that 'Rugby star Paul Grayson's wife is to have twins early by Caesarian so the Northampton Saints player can be at Saturday's Powergen Cup final' - well, somehow, that news is important, for believe or not, it had never occurred to me that childbirth, under certain contingencies, could be viewed as a moveable feast. Oh, and I'm genuinely grateful to Mike for taking the time to cut out of the *Daily Star* a short piece on 'TEN CELEBRITIES WHO ARE PART RED INDIAN'.

I should also like to apologise to him for implying that he might not exist.

Sean Ashton 2006.