

# Individualism, mutualism and 'Big Dinner'

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With 'The Iron Lady's' death and subsequent bizarre funeral fresh in my mind, I can't help but think what the implications of these events and their related historical reminders might be. David Cameron's 'sentiments' from that day still reverberate around my mind: "We are all Thatcherites now," he said, audaciously passing judgement on "us" as the collective one. Considering the uncompromising 'individualism' promoted by Thatcherism, which has become central to its corpus, it seems appropriate that our current Prime Minister should at this time cynically employ the self-promotion that was at the centre of her political ideology.

But these ideas also embody key components in an arts industry increasingly shaped by interactivity and digital expansion. Many recent innovations are inextricably linked, as technology has been designed and adapted in a way which serves the expectations of individuals, to a system committed to and built on capital driven ideals. And the arts cannot claim to exist outside of this system.

Nevertheless, back in the 'real world', or certainly within an art gallery setting (one which I am rather more comfortable in), I am delighted by just how ill-informed these oppressive, self-seeking ideals - that "we" are told we now live by - actually are. Certainly, this 'world' seems to offer a far different set of principles than those uttered by our PM on that 'eventful' day.

When arriving in Margate and entering the space at Limbo in late April 2013, an overall sense of togetherness is evident. A certain dynamic between all the participants, which can often be lacking in a large group show taking place within a contemporary gallery/project space, is instantly recognisable here. The exhibition is titled Big Dinner. I am here a day before the opening, in order to discuss with each of the ten artists their ideas, hopes, experiences, misgivings etc., relating to the exhibition. Gradually I become aware of a collection of differing characters and individuals that seem largely able to work as a cohesive group. These initial observations came to be reinforced after speaking with them all over the duration of the day.

The notion of roles and personalities within a collective is an aspect of this show which in my view is wholly apparent and important. However subjective, these thoughts have become central to my feelings about this

group and crucially the way in which the notion of the 'Big Dinner', as a concept has been utilised in order to frame these artists' practices. I will delve a little deeper into this intriguing aspect, and in some instances rather fraught concept, of a social gathering or event next.

If anyone could be taken as the 'host' for this party it would likely be Matthew Darbyshire. This artist, through his role as tutor at The Slade School of Fine Art, has assembled this group of 10 artists (11 including him, as Matthew is also exhibiting) primarily from a group he teaches there. He describes this group as "simply being a privilege to work with" and after meeting them all I find this comment difficult not to concur with. After the fairly informal chats I have with the group though, I am constantly informed that viewing Darbyshire as some sort of 'host' would be entirely wrong. This is largely due to the diplomatic way in which he, and the group as a whole, have organised this show and been encouraged to take control of how the work is presented. Words and phrases such as 'fresh', 'free', 'bring together', 'informal' are in abundance, as the group attempt a greater level of interplay and connectivity between their works.

Swedish artist Erik Larsson describes how he views the notions of a 'dinner' as "a symbol of equality" or leveller between people; a process where everyone "lets go of their egos", which he hopes will come from this way of working. These attitudes are echoed by most of the group in fact. Henna Vainio, from Finland, describes to me the way in which her work is often dependant of other factors and that this "openness", encouraged by themes adopted by Big Dinner, wholly facilitate such interplay to occur. The space being in a sense 'fixed', yet through a greater sense of "freedom and togetherness" allocated to, and by the group - this will therefore, perhaps permit the potential for a "rich" and more varied form of presentation to take shape (a subject eluded to by South Korean artist Sung Yeon Lim).

Conversely, for certain artists in the fledgling stages of the show "everyone is perhaps being a little too nice to one another". East London based artist Aimee Sawicki seems to be hoping for more interference between works and a less polite, more frank atmosphere to develop. I can now only speculate to whether that occurred or not. But in many ways through her largely endearing anecdotal, slightly sceptical droll - she convinces me that this might well be a good thing. This opportunity to properly take

control of an exhibition space as a group and create a show that playfully and critically deconstructs the perceptions associated with a dinner party - and it's rather bourgeois, middle class connotations - is without question developing more and more each time I am able to peruse the project space. Whether it is exactly to everyone's specific 'tastes' I don't know. James Kelly, a native Dubliner, constantly viewed with a drill in hand, tells me how the idea of a 'dinner party' is something he thinks the group will have to "bring together", or create a "solution" for. It seems these tasks are mainly being tackled with a greater sense of inclusivity.

Considering the environment and location of the show for a moment, one can't help but view Margate through the UK art scene's all prevailing prism: London. The refreshing nature of Margate, which is in the early stages of something akin to a cultural renaissance, has also added an important element to this show. I muse with Julia Crabtree & Will Evans on this subject. This duo, still located in London, formerly ran a gallery in Hackney. Julia describes to me a subtle feeling of "nostalgia", when coming to Margate. The town is somewhat reminiscent of parts of the East End of London 'circa 1992'; prior to most of us not being "invited to the next level" (to quote Will here) of London's relatively recent meteoric and horrific economic rise.

After speaking with many of these artists on the subject of Margate and London, I can say that after a slightly surreal first impression (they first arrived at Limbo as a group during the depths of this year's extended winter), that the group found being in Margate - a new and socially conscious arts led location - a thoroughly refreshing experience. The show in many respects is informed by Limbo, Margate and its aesthetic environment. Milou Van der Maaden, originally from Utrecht, interestingly comments on the space at Limbo. She sees it as being far less "clinical" than some of the more typical contemporary fine art spaces in the capital; an aspect she is intrigued to explore in her work.

There was an almost universal mention of Scott's junk shop in the town, which the artists visited on that first bleak day. The wry nature of the show seems to have taken shape from this excursion, the Big Dinner title and concept as a whole. These ideas were expanded on through much of this experience. Cypriot artist Tara Tate tells me of her instant affiliations with Margate and

how the satirical aspect of the show relates to her own work. It would seem that not everyone within the group is content with the idea of a social - time based event. However, when dealing with this number of artists and their varying views, it is a near unattainable goal to achieve a complete consensus. Nevertheless what does seem evident to me is that the staging of such an event here in Margate has allowed these artists the time and spatial considerations in order to coherently and largely positively work together in the common interest of the group. In the words of UK artist Robert Rivers, "Everyone is relying on everyone". This societal sense of a creative group all working together for the common good of the final Big Dinner show is cordially prevalent here.

As is the case within most areas of commerce and industry, for me, the 'business' side of the arts often has to negotiate the realities of Capitalism and many of the core philosophies associated with its ideology. Equally though, the contemporary art world is often still able to operate in a different way. As Matthew Darbyshire points out, commercial restraints on the artist can at times, lead to them making compromises. Yet at this stage, I see a group totally embracing the freedom allocated to them and at the same time organising themselves in a positive collective manner. There is no lack of group cohesion that I have witnessed, and none of the cut throat individualist ethics "we" are all apparently driven by. Cities and towns may have changed beyond all recognition through Thatcherism; London & Margate exemplify this in a totally polarising fashion. But the common core sense that people are better and achieve more together than apart, in my view will prevail. Therefore, if these artists and this show are any indication of this fundamental bond, I suspect these views are correct.

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