

# The Advertiser

NORWICH EDITION

Friday, July 6, 2007 55p through selected outlets

French|Mattershead - SHOPS - an artwork involving seven Norwich shops, their staff and customers



SHOPS  
FRENCH|MATTERSHEAD  
NORWICH EAST 2007  
NORWICH 2007

Rice  
Tandoori  
Sweet dish  
Curry  
Tandoori chicken  
Vegetables, Seafood

Chilly powder  
Mustard seeds  
Vegetables

Rice

Fish  
Meat  
Pasta  
Pepper

Chilly  
Commander  
Rice  
Fish  
Curry

Bread  
Chilly  
Curry  
Pasta  
Rice

Chilly powder  
Vegetable  
Fish  
Curry

Rice  
Bread  
Curry  
Lentils  
Curry  
get!

2. SPICELAND  
1. 2007  
11. 2007

2 Spiceland Asian & Afro Caribbean Food & Groceries, 24a Magdalen St

EASTInternational 2007

EASTwork

Funded by Contemporary Art Norwich



Contemporary Art Norwich is a biennial celebration of international contemporary visual art in venues and city centre sites across Norwich



...SPECIAL COLLECTORS EDITION...SPECIAL COLLECTORS EDITION...SPECIAL COLLECTORS EDITION...

**Lacunae Mark Wilsher**

This is a series of excerpts of a longer text written in 2007

These images, like all photographs perhaps, seem unnaturally static and still. The figures are distributed evenly across the field of vision of the camera lens, posed frontally with arms hanging straight down, feet neutral, presenting themselves for the documentary record as passively as possible. There is a notable absence of other traffic: no vehicles, no bystanders, no one walking past in the background. It is a consistent look that is carried through each photograph in the series, part of the identity of *The Shops Project* as a whole. It is this stillness that helps to transform the messy complexity of the initial situation into a coherent, legible artwork. And the initial situation can indeed be messy. Before the appointed time of the shoot, Andrew, Rebecca and their assistants wait in anticipation outside each shop, working with the photographer to line up the frame, assigning helpers to keep pavements and backgrounds clear, and wondering how many customers are going to turn up. For the previous week the shopkeeper will have been handing out invitations, often hundreds, but no one can tell the number of people interested or curious enough to give up their time for this rather unusual event.

Gradually, they start to arrive. At first they approach warily, hanging back, wondering what's going to happen. Image release forms are signed and they are asked to write down the purchase that led to their invitation. The practical mechanics of the event swing into play until there is a little crowd of customers, people filling in forms, spectators, and the artists busying around with megaphones and high visibility jackets. Outside Spiceland the participants are placed on the pavement and out into the road, as traffic policeman Graham holds up the flow of cars. The tension mounts as the minutes tick past while Andrew and Rebecca run back and forth placing people for the camera, making sure that everyone can be seen and that the composition holds up. Meanwhile the traffic is starting to mount up. It is a sunny Saturday morning in Norwich and Magdalen Street is on a bus route in and out of the town centre. Small children are placed at the front but photographer Babara Law is having trouble getting them to look into the lens. It has been at least five minutes now and drivers held in the traffic jam are beginning to get impatient. A young motorcyclist zips past the jam the wrong way down the street, but is stopped by Graham and turned



back. For a moment it looks like this could turn nasty as he revs and tries to get past. Barbara is clicking away, frantically checking focus and exposure. Finally someone beeps their horn and this sets off a cascade of hooting up and down the street. Tempers are fraying. The customers, standing in the road at the centre of this noisy protest, look around but hold their nerve. Were they expecting all this when they accepted the invitation to turn up today? Having their photo taken on the street has temporarily turned them into a public spectacle. Finally the artists are done, happy that everyone is positioned well, and that passing pedestrians have been held back out of shot, and Barbara has managed to snatch her picture. The tension breaks as everyone rushes back to the pavement and the traffic finally moves on. A minute later and there is no sign that this street was, for several minutes, taken out of everyday life and made into a stage for the performance of this ritual.

For those taking part, the shopkeepers, the customers and local residents who come across the photos hanging in the shops during the exhibition, this is an exemplary 'site-specific' piece. Everything about the final images, from the names of the shops to the number and appearance of the people who turn up is contingent in the extreme. The *Shops* series as a whole, with its emphasis on independent retailers and micro-communities based on lifestyle and interests is concerned with 'the lure of the local', to use the title of a book by Lucy Lippard. To be in dialogue with the locality is a good thing. That way 'local people' will engage more and feel ownership of the work, going some distance to get over that natural antipathy to spending tax payers' money on contemporary art. The community is reflected and empowered. Political objectives of social inclusion are seen to be addressed and achieved in a cost-effective manner. Everyone is happy.

Imagine buying some jewellery one day and being given a flyer inviting you to come back to have your photo taken the next weekend. Curious, you accept the invitation and find yourself at the centre of a whirlwind of activity and posed slightly uncomfortably in the public eye. A few weeks later the photo is published in a newspaper and is hung up in the shop. Every time you visit now you see yourself as just one of many similar looking people, your kind of people, and you develop a closer bond with the shop owner who is also in the picture. You go to find the rest of the photos that make up the

exhibition and see other groups of people dressed differently and from different demographic groups. You look the artists up on line and find more photos from cities around the UK and Europe. The common structure of the performance/event/photograph is revealed through repetition and you get the sense of your part in a larger artwork. What was local and specific to your life is also universal and abstract. What is aesthetically abstract and formally self-contained is also entirely based on the idea of your personal relationship to the public realm.