

FrenchMottershead

The Post Echo: A Speculative and Open Address

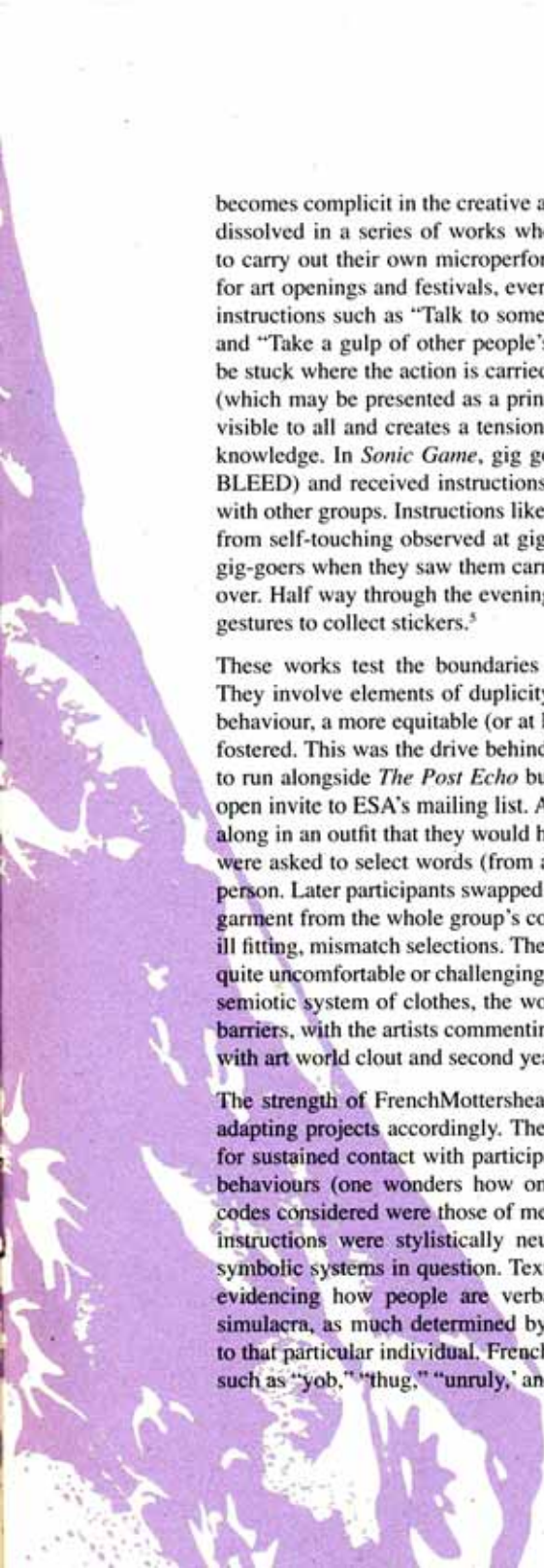
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Ordinarily when I see people with clipboards standing on Briggate I give them a wide berth, for fear of being asked about my landline provider/ whether I pay for my glasses, or to avoid the guilt of not giving to charity. If they get close enough to solicit me verbally (or I accidentally look them in the eye) I listen reluctantly to their spiel, trying to extricate myself without committing to anything. Yet in May 2007 there were 2 clipboard-armed figures on the streets of Leeds that I was keen to find: Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead, seeking participants for their project *The Post Echo*.

Occasions of face-to-face interaction provide the primary material for FrenchMottershead's work. Adopting existing sites and forms, they explore how human identity is negotiated via social rituals and behaviours. For *The Post Echo* they discarded their usual focus on a specific venue (bar, shop, art gallery preview) and spent 5 days walking the streets of Leeds, equipped with a camera and a list of people in situations as reported in the previous day's Yorkshire Evening Post. They asked passers by to select from and empathise with situations such as "Delighted great grandma," or "Two bogus gardeners," then embody them, right there for the camera. The resulting images were compiled into a "photographic journal" in the form of a newspaper, distributed from paper vendors and art venues the following week.¹ Using pre-existing forms (the clipboard-armed street walker, a newspaper and vendors), the project enables interpersonal relationships that circumvent the usual city centre economy of monetary exchange and FrenchMottershead emphasise the importance of their 'live' encounters with Leeds residents.² Yet they recognise that there is no such thing as an unmediated relationship or authentic self-identity. Identity is formed and performed, however unconsciously, in relation to other people and prevailing social/ideological codes.

The Post Echo had two possible modes of reception: you could experience it as a participant on the street or subsequently via the photographic journal. It is the potential both for empathetic identification and for concurrent questioning of the symbolic structures of identity that bridges the street level interactions and the experience of a viewer who picks up a copy of the resulting publication. I will discuss the images and text of the publication shortly but first want to introduce some of FrenchMottershead's other projects, which also convey the importance of the 'live' element of their practice.

Beginning their collaboration in 1999, FrenchMottershead's early works in venues including bars and social clubs involved anonymous 'microperformances' where the audience might encounter performers with roles such as: "someone who will do anything for money" or "an Italian looking for a perfect IVF partner".³ Joshua Sofaer described his experience of attending *Friday Social Evening* (2001) as involving "continual oscillation between belief and suspicion, between enjoyment in your disbelief and irritation at your inability to accept something as either genuine or a lie," a situation that encouraged him and his companion to spin their own yarns.⁴ Such events inaugurated FrenchMottershead's method of producing works where the audience



becomes complicit in the creative act. The border between audience and performer was further dissolved in a series of works where people received written instructions encouraging them to carry out their own microperformances. In *The People Series* (premiered 2003), designed for art openings and festivals, everyone selects a card at random from a collection containing instructions such as "Talk to someone because you think they will be good for your career," and "Take a gulp of other people's drinks." Each card includes a small numbered sticker, to be stuck where the action is carried, that corresponds to a key, listing all instructions. The key (which may be presented as a print, a projection or on beer mats, depending on the venue) is visible to all and creates a tension between what is private/ individual and public/ collective knowledge. In *Sonic Game*, gig goers were split into 4 groups (SONIC, GAME, FULL and BLEED) and received instructions via flyers and text messages telling them how to interact with other groups. Instructions like "scratch a FULL's nose" or "lick a BLEED's lips" evolved from self-touching observed at gigs. In a separate game, participants stuck numbers on other gig-goers when they saw them carry out mundane actions including looking bored or bending over. Half way through the evening the rules switched and people had to intentionally act out gestures to collect stickers.⁵

These works test the boundaries of physical proximity and acceptable social behaviours. They involve elements of duplicity but, by calling attention to the codes that usually govern behaviour, a more equitable (or at least mutually self aware) interpersonal relationship may be fostered. This was the drive behind a second project, *Ready To Where*, commissioned by ESA to run alongside *The Post Echo* but involving a much smaller audience who responded to an open invite to ESA's mailing list. Attendees to this evening workshop were instructed to come along in an outfit that they would happily wear for a night out. Pairing off with a stranger they were asked to select words (from a pre-written list) to express their initial judgements of that person. Later participants swapped clothes so they were wearing a favourite and least favourite garment from the whole group's collection. Then they all went out for a drink together in their ill fitting, mismatch selections. The workshop shifted between states of encounter that could be quite uncomfortable or challenging to moments of bonding and group identity. Pulling apart the semiotic system of clothes, the work had the potential to break down more intractable social barriers, with the artists commenting on how the work was a levelling device between curators with art world clout and second year art students.⁶

The strength of FrenchMottershead's practice is that it is sensitive to context and audience, adapting projects accordingly. The large, dispersed audience of *The Post Echo* did not allow for sustained contact with participants. Though its live element challenged acceptable public behaviours (one wonders how onlookers interpreted the acted out scenarios), the primary codes considered were those of media representation. In contrast to prior works where textual instructions were stylistically neutral, language itself became one of the communicative, symbolic systems in question. Text for *The Post Echo* was drawn directly from a local paper, evidencing how people are verbally depicted in the media. Real people's lives become simulacra, as much determined by prior news stories and figures as by the events occurring to that particular individual. FrenchMottershead point out the frequent use of tabloid language such as "yob," "thug," "unruly," and "victim."⁷

Acting out situations from yesterday's news participants can invest them with meanings counter to the dominant narrative of the news media.⁸ Similarly readers of the publication who view the photographs, subtitled by the original newspaper text, negotiate meaning through an active process of interplay between text and image. Liz Kotz, comparing the work of conceptual artists Victor Burgin and Douglas Huebler, suggests that where Burgin increasingly used text to direct a particular reading of the artwork, often to political/ ideological ends, Huebler continually invoked yet undercut the pointing function of language.⁹ *The Post Echo* is comparable to manifestations of Huebler's *Variable Piece # 70* where photographic portraits were arbitrarily combined with captions drawn from clichés, proverbs and other found language. Though the text-image relationship in *The Post Echo* is not arbitrary, it functions likewise. Giving equal weighting to image and text, it sets off a series of unstable relays to provide what Kotz calls a "speculative and open-ended address to the viewer."¹⁰ Such a strategy negates the possibility for an overt political message, however a reader's attempts to construct a meaningful relationship between image and text enables poignant possibilities.

Some participants have apparently chosen situations that mimic their own. "A teenage girl from Leeds" appears to be just that, "A lifelong resident of Beeston" may well be. Other combinations (a teenager captioned with "One senior supermarket worker" or a man labelled as "The young lady eighth from the left on the back row") show immediate disparity, based on aspects of identity that can be visually perceived. At times visual-textual mismatch stems from distinctions of class or social position that are not so clear-cut. Thinking that the middle aged lady who stands looking matter of fact as "Our next Prime Minister" would never fulfil such a role leads me to consider the limitations on people's lives, depending on their background. Four track-suited young white men posing as "Four senior officers," appear more likely in real life to fulfil the role of the police's adversaries. My judgement a presumption, based somewhat on media representations of the 'look' of hoodies and ASBO youths.

A question arises around the idea of intention and whether participants collude with the subsequent viewer. Contrasting Huebler's *Variable Piece # 70* participants select their own subtitle and the four young men might purposefully perform what the media usually sees as their opposite, reclaiming it from the realm of representations. Yet this self-awareness is difficult to judge. There is the risk that a participant's intention may not translate favourably to the viewer. A vicar, pictured slumped at a bus stop and captioned "A black man in his fifties dead," explained to the artists that he would empathise most with a victim. However the image/text pairing is disquieting for, although adopting the situation of someone of a different race shouldn't be inherently problematic, it seems so when the identity of the actor is over-determined as a figure of authority in relation to another without such symbolic privilege. Moreover, all of the publication's images of death seem farcical: from those that act out an exaggerated version (playing dead) to those that attempt seriousness. Participants may have felt the gravity of the original event but as a reader, the intervening pose makes this difficult to grasp.¹¹

Most poses are much more benign. Some performers strike a pose symbolic of a person's role (not their individual identity). For example posing as if ready to catch/ kick a ball to enact "England's new wicket keeper" or "Top scorer." Or they pick an appropriate setting - "A Nobel prize winner" poses in front of a trophy shop, "One of the 20th century's most important painters" looks to be standing on a plinth (actually the entrance to the Henry Moore Institute).

Where performers focus on the situation represented, they perhaps give less consideration to the reported person(s). Yet, as a reader, I respond to their sense of fun. Similarly, I feel for the people who make very slight gestures. "A former professional musician" is acted by a self-conscious looking elderly lady. She nevertheless spreads out her fingers on top of some railings as if playing the piano. Though here there is little scope for empathy with the original subjects of the stories, I find myself touched by participants' varying responses and levels of enthusiasm.

The strength of *The Post Echo* publication is that its straightforward structure, of text and image, allows a great range of outcomes. The 122 photographs in the publication are very compelling, some funny, others poignant. Some make very little sense at all. There is the risk that individual images might propagate stereotypes, adhering to rather than challenging the language of the media. Yet overall the work raises awareness of systems of signification, particularly in relation to identity and the media. Moreover the project fosters a sense of conviviality between disparate individuals, offering a model for alternative ways of interacting in a consumer, media age.

The Post Echo was commissioned as part of a festival of art in the public realm, so I'd like to conclude with a brief remark on its status as a public art project. One of the commissioning stipulations was that the project involve as many people as possible.¹² FrenchMottershead toyed with ideas of representing particular groups in unexpected ways (for example pensioners snogging) in a bid to break taboos of expected behaviour. The final form they chose is, in fact, more inclusive as it does not rely on perceptions of a particular type or group of people. Alison Green, reviewing existing texts on public art, draws attention to a current focus on the relationship between artist and community. A prevailing issue is whether the artist is deemed able to speak for a particular community.¹³ For example Miwon Kwon discusses how public art projects may rely on simplistic, causal ideas of identity where an artist is selected for their notional ability to represent a particular group.¹⁴ *The Post Echo* bypasses this by setting up a structure that is self-selecting. The artists approach potential participants but people then choose whether or not to join in. Another example is *The Complaints Choir*, initiated by Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, where participants who responded to local advertisements signed up to a Choir where they collectively penned a song voicing their gripes.¹⁵ In these works the artists provide a structure with clear, straightforward parameters that participants consciously fill out. The issues outlined by Green still persist in projects with a specific social agenda, involving a desire to give agency to a particular, defined group. However *The Post Echo* offers an alternative model of public art where, rather than the artists being called upon to represent a particular group, participants are involved in representing themselves and their fellow humanity.

1 *The Post Echo* was commissioned by ESA as part of Situation Leeds festival of art in the public realm (14-27 May 2007). The project was advertised in the festival brochure and website with a telephone number that people could ring to find the artists' whereabouts. Thus the participants were a combination of those who knew about the festival and sought the artists out, and those who were approached cold on the street.

2 My assertions are made from E-mail and phone contact with the artists where they elaborated the discussions and interactions they had with participants.

3 "Microperformance" is defined by the artists as "a number of small, intimate actions, tasks or conversations performed anonymously on or by an active audience." This definition and the roles from Friday Social Evening are taken from FrenchMottershead's website: <http://www.frenchmottershead.com/>.

4 Sofaer, Joshua, review of 'Friday Social Evening' in *Live Art Magazine*, (Apr 2001).

5 Details of The People Series and Sonic Game are taken from the archive of projects at <http://www.frenchmottershead.com/>

6 *Ready To Where* is derived from FrenchMottershead's work *Club Class* where participants can choose one of four micro-classes (Bad Behaviour, Clothing, Surveillance or Body Language), it was an adaptation of the 'Clothing' micro-class. *Club Class* has been held at venues including the Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and the ICA.

7 E-mail contact with the artists.

8 This activity may be classified as what De Certeau calls a "tactic," a way in which consumers re-appropriate cultural products, subverting the rituals and representations that dominant culture imposes on them. de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984.

9 Kotz, Liz, "Image + Text: Reconsidering Photography in Contemporary Art," in Amelia Jones ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, pp 526-529.

10 Ibid, p.529.

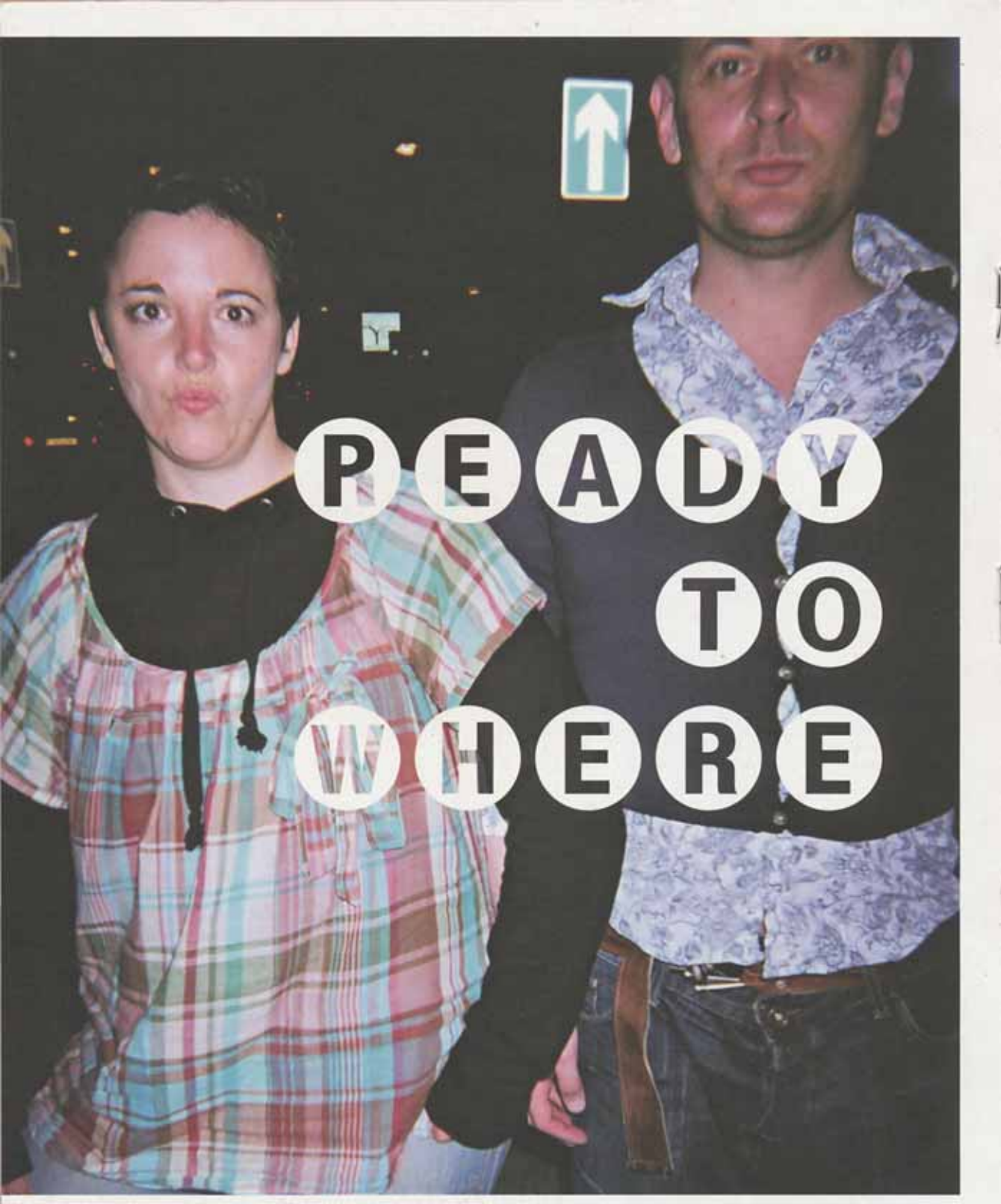
11 Though each individual image of death lacks gravity, the collective effect is more sobering. One participant, looking through the publication at the launch event, commented to the artists that she never realised how many people died in a week.

12 In the end around 175 people were included in 122 photographs. More were approached and spoken to about the project but declined to take part. All participants were invited to the launch of the newspaper at Borders bookshop, 40 of them came and others were sent a copy of the publication. Newsagents and vendors around Leeds were involved in distributing 5000 copies the publication during the second week of the project.

13 Green, Alison, "Reading about Public Art," in Gordon Dalton and Gavin Wade guest ed. *Burning Public Art*, Dialogue Issue 5. This was an edition of the on-line journal "Dialogue" to coincide with the Situation Leeds festival. See: <http://www.axisweb.org/diPreviousIssues.aspx>.

14 Kwon, Miwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT press 2002, pp.139-141.

15 See: <http://www.complaintschoir.org/> Kochta-Kalleinen initially undertook 3 versions of the complaints choir in different cities. This has since spawned several spin off choirs not led by the artists.



P E A D Y
T O
W H E R E



