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Conference *Visual arts, narrative and social class*, organised by Avril Tynan

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University of Turku, Finland

Key Note Lecture 'Well, I think that's quite sufficient', the irresolvable deadlock of class struggle in the arts

Slide 1

Introduction

One of the most frequent pieces of advice I give to my undergraduates is to not only write for an audience who knows nothing of your subject, but to write for what I call the 'grumpy reader', someone who is unable or unwilling to hear what you wish to say. This paper is crafted likewise. It directly speaks to those who deem social class to be irrelevant to the arts, beneath their notice or worse, in the era of populism cemented by Brexit and taken to new heights by the second Trump administration, diametrically opposed to pressing issues of discrimination predicated on ability, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. As I see it, my job, in the next forty minutes and perhaps for the remainder of my career, is to persuade that audience of an argument to the credibility of what I have to say.

So, I begin this paper with an epigraph, taken from Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims*, written in 2009. Published in English for the first time in 2013 he asked himself:

'Why, when I have written so much about processes of domination, have I never written about forms of domination based on class? Or 'Why, when I have paid so much attention to the role played by feelings of shame in processes of subjection and subjectivation, have I written so little about forms of shame having to do with class?' (Eribon, 2019 [2009]: 19).

With this quotation I announce my intention to offer a provocation to arts-based disciplines shaped by identity politics, to illuminate not only their continued marginalisation of the

experience of social class, and denial of opportunity for people from poorer and working-class communities in creative occupations, but to articulate the complex ideological context that impedes, mishears, and misrepresents any attempt to redress that exclusion.

The primary focus of this presentation is the curation and reception of a contemporary exhibition entitled *Lives Less Ordinary: Working Class Britain Re-seen*. Curated by Samantha Manton at the extraordinary venue Two Temple Place, London from 25th January – 20th April 2025.

Slide 2 Interior Two Temple Place, Fricker, Press release

This exhibition brought together works spanning five decades made by 60 artists in Britain to address the ‘crisis of working-class representation and lack of discussion around class difference in the arts’ (Manton, 2025:16). *Lives* attempts to reframe working-class subjectivity beyond ‘the objectifying middle- and upper-class gaze’ that has determined its representation to date, instead revealing the diverse inflection of ethnicities, genders, and sexualities that shape the felt experiences of class.

This curatorial strategy, while responding to the cultural context of the UK, speaks to the broader, pan-European and US political landscapes that are presently divided by populism, where right-wing programmes of austerity and anti-immigration rhetoric go hand in hand with cuts to arts funding. If the arts are to tackle their present precarity head on, it is imperative that they acknowledge the direct correlation between the Right’s claims to represent ordinary people, and its ideologically loaded rejection of the arts. Systemic prejudice in the arts does not merely exclude working class modes of being and thinking, but, I argue, its deafness to what Žižek calls the ‘irresolvable deadlock that is the reality of

class struggle' renders the field culpable in its current socio-economic precarity (Žižek, 2023:46). This paper, therefore, takes the cultural hegemony of the arts to task, calling for greater inclusivity not as a mere enhancement to the discipline, but as a radical restructuring that is imperative to their survival.

Lives Less Ordinary brought together 150 artworks, curating drawings, paintings, photographs, installation, ceramics, and video within the lavish neo-gothic interior commissioned by William Waldorf Astor, designed by John Loughborough Pearson in the 1890s. In this context this exhibition offers a timely and pointed beginning because the response to its curation at the historic venue of Two Temple Place is emblematic of what philosopher Miranda Fricker names 'testimonial injustice', in which the curator and the show's subject matter are denied credibility by their audiences (2007, p.21).

Slide 3 Eardley and Bert Hardy,

Walking around the exhibition in February this year, the curation of this temporary body of work wove a common ground of hardship, work, community and kinship from diverse working-class ethnicities, genders, and sexualities in Britain. The first room of the exhibition places child poverty at the heart its curation, beginning with a pairing of painting and photography derived from the impoverished tenement districts of Glasgow; Joan Eardley's painting of Mary and Pat Sampson c. 1962-63, one of a series of her *Children and Chalked Wall* works that captured the children who lived near her studio Townhead, and Bert Hardy's photograph of the Gorbals Boys, from 1948, the earliest work in the exhibition.

Slide 4 Chris Killip

Close by were the signature practices photographers Chris Killip and Jo Spence; Killip's work from 1976-84 documented the lives of the seacoalers in the North East of England, a community whose survival depended on gleaning coal from colliery waste dumped off the coast, washed up by the tide on the beach at Lynemouth.

Slide 5 Jo Spence and Hetain Patel

Spence's landmark *Photo Therapy* series is represented by *Double Shift/Double Crossed/Double Bind* from 1984, offering a small insight into her career long and often humorous interrogation of the interplay of class, education, family, gender, and work. Hetain (Heteen) Patel's more recent *Baa's House* (2015) takes up the thread of manual labour, redirecting it, however, as a tool of familial belonging rather than gendered, monotonous constraint. As Stan Lee said in 1962 'with great power comes great responsibility' and Patel appropriates Lee's universally recognisable cultural icon Spider-man to affirm an intricate craft based, yet ordinary aesthetic; his sequined superpower queries traditional notions of masculine creativity, binding the local and the global by grounding lives lived in the UK in the legacies of the cultural diaspora of the Gujarati, traversing the hierarchies of popular culture, high art and society.

Slide 6 Hussain, Manfredi and Patel

Framed within Manton's appropriation of Two Temple Place, home of the former hotelier and minor politician William Waldorf Astor, the works of Patel, Mahtab (Maaatab) Hussain and Roman Manfredi stages a direct attempt to destabilise representations of 'working classness' that are synonymous with whiteness'. In the catalogue she writes:

‘Despite black, Asian and minority ethnic communities sharing experiences of precarity and, in fact, being at the sharpest end of inequality in this country. Deliberate attempts by certain media outlets and far-right groups to position race and class as if they are mutually exclusive have reinforced divisive narratives, which lives less ordinary challenges’ (Manton, 2025:39).

Section two

Lives Less Ordinary had the merit of being an exhibition for which the public and art criticism was not ready, whose curatorial strategies have far-reaching intended, unintended, and hence highly productive, outcomes. This power rests on what was for many, the show’s unfathomable juxtaposition of the spectacular opulence of Two Temple Place which, on first inspection, seemed not simply diametrically opposed to the artwork’s direct and indirect portraits of working class life, but a locus of the middle class, bourgeois gaze that Manton claimed to critique.

Slide 7 Jones and Killip

My visit to Two Temple Place had been primed by a less than enthusiastic review published by the Guardian’s art critic Jonathan Jones, subtitled ‘is this really a fair view of the British working class?’ The Guardian is the UK’s most left leaning broadsheet newspaper and once Jones had done reeling from ‘the surprising venue’ in which ‘photos and paintings of common people are hung around a hall that looks like the grand staircase of the titanic’, he applauded its inclusion of Killip’s photographs of the sea coal community, contextualising their production by situating them at the moment at which ‘the industrial, capital letter Working Class was fighting its last stand in the miner’s strike.’ He signs off his review with strong praise for the work of George Shaw, singling out these ‘honest’ and ‘excellent

paintings' that trouble the thirst for the pictureseque that has shaped the conventions of landscape, working with Umbro modeller's enamel, whose tactility transforms the labour of painting into a means of dwelling in the spaces of his childhood home on the Tile Hill Estate in Coventry. In between, however, Jones finds Manton's collection of work simultaneously trapped within 'cliché' and yet failing to deliver what he asserts is the show's 'impossible, goal: not only to correct how the working class are seen but actually to find that class as a single, stable body with an authentic identity across 80 or so years from the 1940s to now.' Instead, he asserts 'working class authenticity keeps spinning away as you look'.

Jones' review is not subject to the academic rigour of a journal article or even exhibition catalogue essay, and so one could wave away its criticisms as insufficiently grounded in academic discourse. I take the opposing view, however, that it is precisely because Jones presents a synthesis of popular, generally held but still supposedly left leaning views on the nature of class, its place and representation, that his criticisms are so instructive, if admittedly unwittingly so.

Jones' disapprobation turns on his inability to comprehend the curatorial strategy outlined in the press release and the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition does claim to offer its audience an insight into authentic experiences of class, but at no point does it claim that as a stable identity discernible throughout the ages; class is plural and multifaceted, not some kind of monolithic essence. This misreading is indebted to telling preconceptions about what is and is not readily identifiable as the lived reality of class struggle, who has the right to show it, their motivations for doing so, and more pointedly the aspects of working-class life worthy of representation.

I want to draw attention to two examples that reveal the review's preconceptions. The first is its dismissal of Roman Manfredi's series *We/Us*. Jones writes 'Oh for another Killip to record and portray the ways people work and survive in Britain right now. Instead, we get a lot of attitude [...] In Roman Manfredi's photographs butch lesbians pose in raw urban settings. We are told they are working class but that seems a very essentialist way to describe personae that clearly embrace artifice and masquerade'. The anti LGBT sentiment that belies this statement could be the substance of a whole other keynote, particularly in light of events in the UK this week. But trying to stay on topic, what the review suggests is that gender and sexuality are extraneous to class, and any claim to the contrary is disingenuous.

Slide 8 Shaw and Manfredi

Jones' closing remarks place class in opposition to gender and sexuality by contrasting the supposed artifice of Manfredi with George Shaw's muted landscapes. The 'show scores' he writes, 'when it drops its heavy load of idealism actually allows in art that bravely depicts the reality of this unequal land'. Shaw's paintings are mobilised here as a more palatable representation of working-class British landscape, one that crucially avoids a confrontation with the subjects that live life in those environments, rejecting their gaze and the visibility they demand. It is hard to defend Manfredi's work against Jones' review without being drawn into its subtext, that frames Shaw within a nostalgic, romanticised industrial, predominantly white, deserving working class, effacing the unsightly undeserving poor.

This distinction is perceptible in Jones supposition about the exhibition's curatorial strategy based on what it isn't in it; the 'toe-curling' work of Martin Parr and 'squalid' photographs of Richard Billingham.

Slide 9 Billingham and Sensation

Jones sets Parr and Billingham up in opposition to Killip, creating an opportunity to rehearse what, I have argued elsewhere, is a tired and unjust critique of Billingham's body of photographs *Ray's A Laugh*. That argument claims that this body of work, which began while Billingham was an undergraduate at the University of Sunderland, sought to exploit his parents by offering them up to the 'bourgeoise gaze' in order to gain entry into the artworld, announced by the work's inclusion in Charles Saatchi's infamous 1997 *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy, London. Billingham's representation of his parents Ray and Liz, Jones concedes are good photographs, but not, he suggests, sufficiently upbeat for Manton's show. My own view is it is far more likely than Manton avoided Billingham to dodge the kind of bile that continues to dog his work thirty years after it was first exhibited and would sadly derail any curatorial strategy that sought to take class seriously.

Jones' unnecessary regurgitation of the criticism of Billingham signifies his investment in the more deserving, toil of the seacoal community, which taps into a timeless classed quality of grit in the face of adversity, the determination to eek out a meagre but honest living rather than scrounge off the state. Jones treatment of Killip and Billingham reveals the degree to which the Left in Britain has assimilated the morals of neoliberalism, holding the poor in contempt for their poverty without comprehending what Chantal Mouffe (Moof) has called neoliberal capital's dehumanising 'new forms of subordination' that have emerged outside the productive process' (Mouffe, 2019, p.6).

Writing in *New Left Populism* in 2018 Mouffe recalled the interview in which Margaret Thatcher proclaimed that her greatest achievement had been 'Tony Blair and New Labour'.

Citing Stuart Hall's analysis of the New Labour's Thatcher lite ideology she notes its 'discursive figures: "the 'tax payer (hard-working man, over-overtaxed to fund the welfare 'scrounger') and the 'customer' (fortunate housewife, 'free' to exercise limited choice in the market place, for whom the 'choice agenda' and the personalized delivery were specifically designed). No-one ever thinking either could also be a public citizen who needs or relies on public services' (Hall quoted in Mouffe, 2019:32).

In order to put the contempt for the economically inactive poor in the UK in context for a Finnish audience, it's useful to note each nation's different provision for the Welfare State. In Finland and UK GDP per capita is remarkably similar standing at \$53,326 and \$53,195, respectively. In Finland the state allocated 31.7% of GDP to its social protection budget for this fiscal year an increase of 1.6%, in 2024 the UK allocated 10.9% to welfare. I'm no economist and don't know the ins and outs of these figures but there seems to be no denying the disparity of approaches which is absolutely indebted to the UK's whole-sale adoption of neoliberalism under Thatcher.

Slide 10 Julie Cook and *Lives interior*

It is this vilification of poor and working-class communities that *Lives Less Ordinary* made palpable. The first part of this lecture's title is an amalgam of the ideas of Žižek, who I will come back to, and the comments of an unknown visitor to Two Temple Place, whom I had the fortune or misfortune, depending how you look at it, to overhear. As I stood on the landing of the upper gallery, on *Foxy 4* by Julie Cook/East London Stripper Collective, a man came to the top of the stairs and approached a woman, who by his tone I'm guessing had been his partner of some years, proclaiming with audible disdain, 'WELL, I think *that's quite*

sufficient' and who, reaching out his hand, went on to say 'if it wasn't for all the beautiful mouldings' tapping the mahogany panels with his fingertips as his speech trailed off. To give her her due, his partner attempted to assuage his contempt by countering 'well I think it's quite interesting'. Immediately shushing her however, he declared his resolution of going downstairs to the café to have a coffee, while she continued to make her way around the exhibition. When I recounted this event to Rebecca Hone, Head of Community Engagement at Two Temple Place she noted that it clearly hadn't occurred to this visitor that the ingenuity and skill that had crafted the panels, the windows and masonry of the building was all working-class.

It is no exaggeration to say that this gentleman felt wronged; that the exhibition was an affront to his aesthetic sensibilities. While I confess, I was taken aback by the ferocity of his rejection of the show, I was not remotely surprised by its substance. The roots of this symbolic violence lie in the 'hermeneutical marginalisation' of class in the arts (Fricker, 2007, p. 152) or what Bourdieu articulates as 'a systematic refusal' of 'the passions, emotions and feelings which *ordinary* people put into their *ordinary* existence' in 'art since the Renaissance' (1986, pp. 31–32). Historically, art has been hailed as the highest form of culture, an index of the noble impulses that make humanity human. As such, the logic goes, it holds the power to elevate society, to 'gradually lift' people up, as art critic Herbert Read would say, 'onto the cultural level' (Read, 1941). *Lives Less Ordinary* does not do this. Rather it asks audiences to attend to what has been deemed parochial and provincial, to change the 'the cultural level' again to invoke Read, it says 'to hell with culture' capital C.

This move is made possible by the collision of the opulence of Two Temple Place, a venue which on my visit at least, draws crowds from a demographic fascinated to see the building's

interior than the works on display. Contrary to the white cube, which effaces its ideological foundations under the guise of neutrality, the excessive ornamentation of its interior forces the issue of privilege, and holds the works contained in the exhibition in tension with it, refusing resolution. The fact that I overheard the conversation I did on my one visit to the show, the self-consciousness and discomfort it made me feel, is not the product of some bolt from the blue serendipity but because this struggle between classes was the very substance of the work's curation. In this and I suspect countless other moments *Lives Less Ordinary* forced the issues of exclusion and shame to the surface, leaving them to flounder there unresolved.

Section 3

Slide 11 Eribon, Julie Cook, interior *Lives Less Ordinary*

I want to argue that class shame should not be articulated as the inadequate concept of impostor syndrome, which attributes an inability to 'fit in' to a deficiency on the part of an individual ill at ease with their gifts or success. Rather this shame comes from the systematic discrimination that is heard, seen and felt day in day out, which fuels the choice of many to take the path of least resistance, and pass for what they are not.

I have written at length on how participation in the arts for people from poor and working-class backgrounds in UK comes at the expense of an assimilation to a culture which is not their own. This argument is supported by Bourdieu's lectures on Manet and his discussion of the revolutionary power of the painter's depiction of 'low subjects' (2017: p. 381). Manet, Bourdieu tells us, had been free to reveal the 'social facts' of Modernity like no other, whilst artists from 'provincial backgrounds' had no choice, but to concern themselves with the

cultural legitimacy of the 'academic painter' (p. 372). Artists from the provinces, he notes, were disadvantaged by 'accent' and deportment, vital attributes in 'universes where the operative principles are aesthetic qualities' (p. 296). Those who could not 'gain acceptance' within the 'highly competitive', 'brutal', and 'bullying' environment of the École des Beaux Arts (p. 371), would find themselves 'gently expelled' and returned to whence they came (p. 296). Career 'patterns of this type', Bourdieu concludes, 'were ten a penny' in nineteenth century France (p. 296). Sadly, systematic injustice predicated on classed identity prejudice continues to permeate art schools, 'even today', Bourdieu noted in 2000, the intellectual and artistic milieu tolerates people of humble origins much less well than the bourgeoisie' (p. 296).

In 2023, Bourdieu's argument was born out by a longitudinal study was published in the journal *Sociology* that analysed fifty-years of creative occupation employment data from the UK's Office of National Statistics (Brook et al). Its aim was to question the commonly held perception that the want of inclusivity in the creative sector is a relatively new phenomenon, which stands in contrast to a heyday of 'openness' in the arts in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Their analysis found that the odds of employment for graduates from the most affluent backgrounds was double that of a peer from the working-class. Perhaps more shockingly, though not surprisingly, they also found that compared to people who were working-class and/or from ethnic minorities and/or women, a person was still 'three times' more likely to have a job in the creative occupations if they were male, came from an affluent background, lived in London, and yet *didn't* have a degree (2023: 801). The systemic inequality of the creative sector is not, they argue, a recent development but endemic. Contrary to the belief that the arts were once a haven of meritocracy, they demonstrate that

opportunity for creative work is and always has been ‘profoundly unequal in class terms’ and that ‘gender and ethnicity compound inequalities of access to the cultural sector’ (2023:802). The result of this lack of inclusivity is a scarcity of artists, curators and other arts professional who are able to champion the case of class in the arts, or who are willing to do so, and it is this context to which *Lives Less Ordinary* responds.

For me to speak openly as a scholar from the working class is to go against the rhetoric of social mobility inscribed in my given name, Vanessa, purposely chosen to distinguish my future life from an extended family that I have not seen for more than thirty years. My being is marked by growing up in what I can only describe as a familial class war, fought on the battlefield of education. The lived experience of this displacement, the loss of the familiar, the comfort of people who can affirm one another’s being by looking, sounding, and even acting a bit like you, has lurked at the core of thirty years of interminable self-invention through drawing, painting, thinking, and writing.

In *Returning to Reims* Eribon notes that ‘whatever you have uprooted yourself from or been uprooted from still endures as an integral part of who or what you are’ (Eribon, 2019:11-12). In his writing I recognise a subject caught between two worlds, a fellow hostage to a mode of being that he describes via reference to Bourdieu’s ‘powerful’ concept of ‘split habitus’ (Eribon, 2019: 12). If there is only one takeaway from this lecture, I want it to be that this split self should not be viewed through the deficit model of the impostor. It affords its subjects a cognizance of the world of art and the academy, and the other world of ordinary working people but belong to neither. We have, therefore, nothing to lose, and this gives us the strength to make trouble.

So far, I hope I have managed to show that expanding the inclusivity of the arts to include socio economic status and put it in dialogue with other modes of difference will be far from a straight forward affair. My decision to introduce the hidden shame of class through Eribon's *Returning to Reims* speaks to the need to assert the credibility of this argument, but more importantly to illuminate the way in which the class functions differently in the eras of identity politics and populism. To quote Eribon at length:

'It doesn't seem exaggerated to assert that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might class a class closet, I mean by this that I took on the constraints imposed by a different kind of dissimulation; I took on a different kind of dissociative personality or double consciousness (with the same kinds of mechanisms familiar from the sexual closet: various subterfuges to cover one's tracks, a very small set of friends who know the truth but keep it secret, the taking up different interlocutors, a constant self-surveillance as regards one's gestures, one's intonation, manners of speech, so that nothing untoward slips out, so that one never betrays oneself, and so on)'. (Eribon, p.20-21).

Slide 12 Eribon, Deleuze, Mouffe

What Eribon describes is the transformation of the political landscape that, as Mouffe notes, 'in the wake of the 1968 revolts and that corresponded to resistances against a variety of forms of domination which could not be formulated in class terms. The second wave of feminism, the gay movement, the anti-racist struggles and issues around the environment had a profoundly transformed the political panorama (Mouffe, pp.1-2). Eribon

narrates this transformation in his reference to Gilles Deleuze's alphabet book where he puts forward the idea that "being on the left" means "first of all being aware of the world," "being aware of what's on the horizon" (by which he means considering that the most urgent problems are those of the third world, which are closer to us than the problems of our own neighbourhood), whereas "not being on the left" would, in contrary fashion, mean being focused on the street where one lives, on the country one inhabits, the definition [Deleuze] offers is diametrically opposed to the one incarnated by my parents. In working class environments, a leftist politics means first and foremost a very pragmatic rejection of the experience of one's daily life. It was a form of protest, and not a political project inspired by a global perspective' (Eribon, pp38-39)

Put quite simply issues of class disappeared from the New Left. The specificities of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality have been instrumental to the recent decolonization of art and its histories in the past ten years (Grant & Price: 2020). Socio-economic status, however, continues to be routinely overlooked by university arts curricula, reviews, books, and journal articles (Corby, 2024). As Holberg Prize winning art historian Griselda Pollock succinctly described this critical silence, 'class is the elephant in most rooms' (Grant & Price: 2020). There are many countless examples of discrimination and exclusion I can point to, Billingham's case being just one, but rather than wheel out more vilification I'd like to share an example of critical silence to pick up Jones' thread about the incompatibility of questions of class, gender and race

Slide 13 Himid with Tate catalogue and poster

by briefly turning to another exhibition and its catalogue, this time from Tate Modern, which hosted the retrospective of Royal Academician and Turner Prize winning British artist, Lubaina Himid (1954) in 2021. The work I wish to consider is Himid's *A Fashionable Marriage* (1984-86, Fig.1) is a wonderfully witty theatrical collage installation that reworks William Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode: The Toilette* (c.1743).

Slide 14 Himid and Hogarth

The Toilette is one of a series of paintings in which Hogarth, who can also be seen to bear the marks of a split habitus, satirised the aristocracy's lack of sexual mores beneath its public propriety. In the catalogue that accompanies Himid's retrospective Lisa Merrill describes how *A Fashionable Marriage* picks up Hogarth's caricature of an adulterous countess and her lover to stage,

A response to the racism and sexism of the 1980s art world, as well as to the repugnant politics and machinations of political power in the 'love affair' that united Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan' (Merrill, 2021; 104-105).

Born in Zanzibar before migrating to Britain, Himid is renowned for articulating stories hitherto marginalised and silenced by the colonialist and patriarchal ideologies of the West. In the history of Western painting people of colour are rarely the subject of the picture but consigned to the figure of a prop, usually in the form of a domestic servant, the role to which society confined them after abolition. Himid makes this marginalisation more present by shifting the roles of the black figures in *A Fashionable Marriage* and affixing newspaper clippings which read 'fortress white' and 'staunch supporter of Apartheid' to the central figure of the work, Margaret Thatcher.

Slide 15 Himid and Mouffe

Although Hogarth's satire directly addresses the question of class, the exhibition catalogue's discussions of *A Fashionable Marriage* does not. Left of centre, Himid placed a newspaper photograph of the Prime Minister in a miner's helmet, taken during Thatcher's visit several years earlier, in 1980, to Wistow Colliery in Selby, North Yorkshire (detail). The face of the former Conservative Prime Minister is repeated numerous times in the collage, but it is this particular image to which the viewer's gaze is drawn.

Himid began this artwork in 1984; the same year in which the National Union of Mineworkers went on strike in response to the threat posed to their livelihoods, their families and their communities whilst Thatcher refused to endorse sanctions against Apartheid to secure the West's access to South Africa's weapons grade uranium during increasingly poor working conditions in its mines (Allen, 2003), the same year in which Thatcher famously named British miners the 'enemy within' (1922 Committee, July 1984).

Industrial historian and former NUM Branch Secretary at Hatfield Main Colliery, David Douglass, described the miner's strike of 1984/85 as a 'crossroads' for economic policy in the UK: 'Had they held that picket line and [the Miner's] had won [...] the whole change in social policy about benefits and privatisation, the things that could have happened that didn't happen', an opportunity 'for the Left, that never tired of talking of revolution, to put their papers down and march alongside us' (Deller, 2002). Thatcher's handling of the 84/85 miner's strike had been modelled on the hard line that Regan had taken in 1981 in response to the strike of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO); a decisive move intended to break the power of the trade unions and usher in a new neoliberal era of deregulation and free trade (Cooper, 2012). The central piece in the romance of Regan and Thatcher's special

relationship was, as former MP Tony Benn described, the 'war' that Thatcher launched in the UK against the unions (Figgis & Deller, 2001).

I will always contend that the primary strength art and literature is that its material negotiation of the world we live in runs ahead of theory, and Himid's *Fashionable Marriage* is a case in point. Himid presents a critique of the cycle of class and racial injustice in the new era of neoliberal deregulation in a timely and incisive representation of Thatcher, prefiguring the argument of political scientist Adolf Reed Jr. in 2023 that 'slavery was fundamentally a labour relation' and Mouffe's extensive discussion of Thatcher and the significance of the miner's strike in the Prime Minister's almost single handed 'consolidation of neoliberal hegemony' in *New Left Populism* three years prior to the exhibition at Tate (Mouffe, 2019; 27-38). All of these political machinations were ready to be seen, but they weren't.

I want to begin to conclude by situating this invisibility within what Žižek called the 'irresolvable deadlock that is the reality of class struggle'. Writing in 2023 essay he argues that Neoliberal economies deflect attention from the 'domination and exploitation' that fuels the privations people of low socio-economic status by ascribing to equality initiatives that put differences of ability, gender, and ethnicity in 'permanent mutual conflict, while the elite withdraws and observes the game from a safe distance' (Žižek, 2023:47).

The marriage of the arts to an identity politics that recognises only differences of ethnicity, gender and sexuality divorced from socio-economic status is not only a misrepresentation of all of those differences but plays straight into the hands of this populist agenda. 'The secret

of identity politics' Žižek points out 'is that, in it, the white/male/hetero position remains the universal standard; everyone understands it and knows what it means, which is why it is the blind spot of identity politics, the one identity that is prohibited to assert' (Žižek, 2023:47).

Around this vacuum, he and Mouffe argue, populism has mobilised the notion that whiteness is endangered by the equality and diversity agenda of the New Left.

Arguments such as Jones' are, therefore a gift for the right, not only because it advocates a timeless, discrete, authentic notion of class unincumbered by and incompatible with questions of equality and diversity but also by querying the credibility of the exhibition, Jones reinforces the perception that class and the arts are not compatible, that art is not for the likes of me.

Slide 16 cuts and populism

In the UK in 2015 the Conservative's Election Manifesto sought to ameliorate the party to 'ordinary' working people by removing the arts from the statutory national curriculum for children aged 14 and over; taking education back for 'your' children, just as curbs on immigration and the promise of an EU Referendum would take back 'your' country. In other words, the Conservatives first step on the road to the culture wars weaponized the fact that the arts aren't for ordinary people and that immigration was the main obstacle to their employment, health, well-being and crucially, identity as citizens of the UK. Under the Conservative government from 2017 onwards funding for the arts in the UK was cut by 16% galvanising their position.

If we needed confirmation of the culture wars in 2025, we can need look no further than the series of edicts that seek to save the Smithsonian Museum by 'removing improper ideology' outlined in the Executive Order issued by the White House on the 27th March.

Unambiguously titled 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History' which states:

‘Americans have witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth. This revisionist movement seeks to undermine the remarkable achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light. Under this historical revision, our Nation’s unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness is reconstructed as inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed’.

The difficulty since Brexit and Trump, is the need to distinguish between the very real privations of class and the Right’s exploitation of those hardships for political gain. In 17 December 2024 the Bank of Finland released a statement that the nation’s recovery was slow and will show a contraction of 0.5% for 2024, but is forecast to grow by 0.8% in 2025, and by 1.8% in 2026 and 1.3% in 2027 (Bank of Finland, 2024 [link](#)). This was followed on three days later by the Budget for 2025 which announced 17.4 million euros of cuts to the provision for arts and culture. Looking at the sector’s responses to the cuts, admittedly those in English and even then, only briefly, it seems to me that the arts in Finland are advocating for their survival based on the damage that will be done to the international standing of Finnish art, the benefits of the arts for individuals and the economy.

Descending the escalator watching Tosca on the Culture Stage at Helsinki Airport on Tuesday reminded me that accessibility to the arts is not synonymous with inclusivity. The situation in the UK in which education is in crisis and the welfare state all but dismantled gives me a certain kind of perspective, surety in the knowledge that populism accrues power in communities blighted by poverty. If the arts are to survive, where ever they may be, they have to dismantle the systemic discrimination against class that is both historic and the product of identity politics. It has to go beyond the trickle-down model of a transcendent

thing called Culture, capital C. to make the arts meaningful, to recall Herbert Read again, from the bottom up. By testing strategies with which to articulate the mutual inflection of differences in the manner of *Lives Less Ordinary*, to destabilise the us and them which is so essential to the right's populist mentality, the arts have to be seen to be *fully* inclusive not just for the few.

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