

BUILT WITH LOVE

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Margaret Thatcher died on Monday. Inevitably, her death sparked a wealth of commentary. This encompassed cheap shots and scathing invective, but also some calm and considered meditation on the kind of United Kingdom her often-brutal policies had ushered in. Everyone, it seemed, had a view on Thatcher – even Irish people of my generation, politically conscious only long after her demise. Inherited wisdom precipitates a woman of mythical callousness, over which good had finally triumphed. With her death on Monday, the opportunity for gleeful celebration arrived once again, as if only in death could she be conclusively eliminated.

In fact, Thatcher had to die twice: the first symbolically, with her political demise; the second, actually and really requiring her death. By these two deaths she is taken out of the frame *tout court*. But surely most people require only one death?

Thatcher was not just a woman; in that case one death would of course have been sufficient. Thatcher was not just a woman, but also a figurehead, a harbinger of coming times; specifically, of an ideology so deeply entwined with her policies that it bears her name. Under Thatcherism, privatisation runs rampant accompanied by mass unemployment, and with this a kind of unflinching antipathy towards the needs of the working classes. Indeed, by the implication of this ideology, communities and classes dissipate, leaving only *individuals*. The mutually symbiotic relation between economics and politics permits the market to take its course, with little or no regard for the ill it necessitates.

Monday's events, and the fracas still ensuing, attempts to put forward a notion that the United Kingdom of nowadays is irrevocably different following her two substantive deaths, that it is now a new – ostensibly better – place. It is not too much of a stretch to say that what is suggested, arguably with an air of desperation, is that Thatcherite *ideology* died alongside her: that a redemption of sorts has taken place. But has it really? It appears to me stronger than ever, growing simultaneously more ubiquitous and imperceptible.

This may seem an odd place to start writing, preoccupied with the death of an old and infirm former Prime Minister. But is the anxiety regarding ideology, its doggedness, endurance and invisibility, not the root cause of the extreme attention towards Thatcher's death? Is this anxiety not also the explicit concern of *built with love*? This anxiety is manifested to varying degrees; Daniel Tuomey's strategy is warm and conversational, yet probing; Ai Weiwei's nothing short of polemical. All of the artists presented in the exhibition<sup>1</sup> are preoccupied with the notion of ideology, how it might move and change over time, the effects it silently imparts on us, and yet each finds a different means of approach; the family home no lesser a starting point than the death of that elderly, much-maligned, politician. Ideology has multiple points of entry, but not many, perhaps, in the way of escape.

In a discussion of artworks the tendency is of course to flatten, to seek out synchronicity and pay little heed to the distances *inbetween* the works before me. Indeed, the works are selected by virtue of commonalities, rather than differences. The critic, myself, invariably hones in on these common traits. Ideological by nature, this strategy sets out to flatten difference,

however necessary, in the service of intelligibility. Here, of course, this commonality is indeed a preoccupation with ideology, but wider than this, their inclusion itself is built on ideology: the ideology that seeks as much as possible to reconcile the different with the normative, to find some consensus in often wildly divergent works. Like ideology, this strategy is both quotidian and supposedly necessary: the curator's role is to subdue the specificity of works, and to find other works for them to define themselves by.

Differences remain, however: they subsist regardless of ideological forces encroaching upon them. Daniel Tuomey's work, *Scene of the Collaboration (A house that love built)* (2013), taking the family home as his starting point, sets out to make manifest this point. Here, the comforting familiar narrative, tracking the interior of the artist's well-worn domicile, is treated in a somewhat ambiguous light. It becomes a microcosm of the wider world, the first point of conflict with an ideological structure larger and more powerful than your own: this is, of course, your parents, and the set of beliefs and ideals that they impart to you, as a child. This house, 'built with love' though it is, imparts a regulatory system – undoubtedly well-meaning and innocuous – that can be viewed in the same light as ideology. The house's walls endeavour to create a specific person, beholden to the values of the family, and yet the artist anomaly is not curtailed. His growth as an artist takes place within these walls, in the interstitial gaps of their beliefs and ideals, in the process forging a new space for operation not wholly bound by them. But here's the rub: he creates a new space for himself, yet he remains under their roof. Insofar as he can rebel and disagree and forge a new space for himself in the world – like any child – he remains, metaphorically and literally, under their roof: implicated in a kind of post-embryonic ideology.

There is a sense, too, that every ideological gesture is one of love: ideology as a practice initiated, at least politically, with good intent, in the belief that 'I know better'. Indeed, Thatcher often articulated her political measures through this language, implicating them in a benevolent gesture of 'tough-love'.<sup>2</sup> The pain, she argued, was for the greater good. The similarities between the parental, and in Thatcher's case, the matriarchal gestures are explicit: it is this gesture that Tuomey at once problematises and finds solace in, to great effect. For the truth is, he seems to say, that these structures, ideological though they might be, are reassuring: we find comfort in them.

The relationship with ideology articulated through Ai Weiwei's two works, *4851* and *Disturbing the Peace* (both 2009), demonstrates very little in the way of prevarication. Both provide troubling accounts of the deleterious impact ideology can have in the world, permeating every facet of society. *4851* takes as its subject matter the victims of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008: the title is the total sum of casualties, with the film comprising their names being shown on screen, running for an emotionally protracted 88 minutes. Though I cannot understand the characters on screen, the magnitude of the disaster accumulates over time. The music, too, a kind of serene but solemn accompaniment, adds to this overwhelming sense of horror: as the music repeats over and over, any hope of overcoming, of something happening, is gradually extinguished. Nothing changes. The act of having the names, of gaining access to them, is through a small act of dissent: after the earthquake, the Chinese authorities continually refused access to the figure and names, with Ai Weiwei having to recruit volunteers to gain this information.



A medium shot of Ai Weiwei, a man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a light blue polo shirt. He is seated and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background consists of dark wood paneling with several circular decorative elements. The lighting is soft, coming from the front, highlighting his face.

...shoddy construction standards and student deaths in the May 12th earthquake.





Kevin Cosgrove Workshop with Gas Cylinder Oil on linen 60 x 80 cm 2013



Another figure in this act of defiance was Tan Zuoren, who investigated the poor construction methods used in many buildings in Sichuan, which invariably led to a higher number of casualties. He was subsequently arrested for 'incitement to subversion of state power', and sentenced to five years imprisonment in 2010. The events leading up to his trial forms the basis of Ai Weiwei's other work here, the at once horrifying and absurd *Disturbing the Peace*. This documentary follows Ai and his young disciples in their attempt to exercise their civic duty and right: in this case, to act as a witness in Tan Zuoren's trial. Their every attempt is thwarted, with the group being subject to beatings, being followed, arrested, and with most frequency, the astonishing obfuscation of Chinese bureaucracy "it's not convenient to tell you", etc. Nothing is explained. Laws are flouted to the point of non-existence: at one point of the film a policeman goes so far as to suggest that Ai "beat himself and tore his own clothes." Orwell's *1984* is but a heartbeat away. The China Ai Weiwei presents us with is one in which ideology no longer has to justify itself: it is self-propagating, by and on its own terms. Jargon dominates, and confusion alongside it. Ideology here is simply the articulation of power, it inserts itself into every situation; the email or phone call, even that hastily-composed text message sent to a friend. Ideology precipitates a fear of being caught out, but being caught out is not based on wrongdoing: often it is but a completely arbitrary demonstration of power. Nowhere is Tuomey's thoughtful prevarication: the actions of the Chinese authorities leave little space for doubt.

Ruth Buchanan's *Build a wall or be a room* (2008) approaches the ideological space almost poetically, taking the formal structure of a building as its starting point. It exists as a thoughtful meditation on the possibility of symbiosis between design and what we call nature, on the appropriateness of buildings and their ability to exist in harmonious accord. Much design, she suggests, is predicated on the desire to *hide*, to shrug off the demands that bear down upon it: indeed, this is the problem. It is a false hope; "The wind bears down on the house, but the human can hide. However, the human must enter the building." Humans cannot exist only in buildings, but must negotiate their existence alongside the outside world.

Buchanan offers one example of countering this challenge. The Chatham Islands, an archipelago situated in the Pacific Ocean some 680km south of New Zealand, fights, as one might imagine, an interminable battle with winds that batter its isolated coasts. To build here is a challenge to say the least. Here, however, the inhabitants decided that instead of flattening their opponent – that is, the wind – they would work alongside and accommodate it. By this, they built homes that placated the wind, used its might, ones that bent and swayed with its force. They could of course have built formidable monstrosities of concrete, but found in their homes' gentle swaying a great deal of comfort and reassurance. Here, the logic of "something else and something else" is flattened, and the impetus to rebel against dominant structures appeased. The building can be a positive image of ideology too, provided that we build well.

Kevin Cosgrove's contribution to the exhibition, *Workshop with Gas Cylinder* (2013), is an oil on linen painting. This, in itself, has a specific history and lineage; even, you might say, an ideology. To work in a medium such as oil, means, of course, to be already embroiled in a narrative or ideology: such is the gift of medium. Here, the worker's tools of trade are presented in a kind of line-up, the gas cylinder only an equivalent player in this field of relations. Indeed, I struggled to

recognise it: which is to say that the objects as sum total, is what is crucial here, their power to collectively enact or create. These are the tools of someone's labour, it would appear, someone's means of living. In this painting they are given the weird treatment of people: they are imbued with a sympathy normally associated with humans. It crosses from still life, to a kind of portrait. This treatment contests the value placed on objects as means to an end, and, implicitly, the view that treats humans also as *objects* – as means, through labour, to an end. In this work, Cosgrove reclaims the space of labour as one with the potential to remain free from the forces of alienation.

Cosgrove alludes to ideology through a meditation on labour. Most scenes he depicts are within the sphere of working life, but in a pointedly direct and un-mediated way. This is the domain of individual workers – however utopian – having an affinity with not just their labour, but also the tools required therein: these objects are not disposable or infinitely replaceable. These meticulously painted oils, with a natural luminosity and exuberance, permit a new permanence and weight. In this way, Cosgrove's work offers up a new understanding of labour, and new potentialities hidden by neo-liberal (Thatcherite) thought.

A preoccupation with ideology is omnipresent in Declan Clarke's work: more specifically, ideologies lost and how they precipitate and are represented with the passing of time. *We Are Not Like Them* (2013) is deeply illustrative of this tendency. Alluding to Russian science-fiction author Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We* (1921), Clarke's title, echoing Zamyatin's tale, tells the story of ideology turned sour, of identity based on exclusion. The 'We' is predicated on a polarized 'Them'. Zamyatin is central to this work, as the artist appears to seek out his traces in a kind of film-noir expedition across Europe. The film, shot in black and white 16mm, reiterates this nostalgic impulse. Recognizing the artist as protagonist, also creates a disjunction in apprehending the film as of the time of 16mm: we know the streets he walks are modern ones, and yet the artificiality of the *mise-en-scène* is maintained.

The film has all the suspense of a thriller, with very little in the way of disclosure as to what the artist is actually doing, and for what purpose. At one point, he enters a darkened room, is given a set of paperbacks and postcards, and instructed to visit the cities depicted therein. We do not know why. What ensues is an account of this bizarre task: long shots of industrial cities, for the most part unrecognisable. One locale provided a clue, however: Newcastle-on-Tyne, one of the cities depicted in the postcards. Zamyatin worked in this city overseeing industrial labour, and it was here, it appears, that his disillusionment with communism – or at least its real-world articulation – was first felt. Zamyatin was of course not only a science-fiction writer, but also a political satirist. Both tendencies exist symbiotically; they are but two faces of the same coin. Science fiction and satire critique the 'what is'; the former by implicit means, the latter explicitly. Both offer the possibility of an alternative, however fantastical that might be.

The role of the artist might then be to imagine such alternatives, or at least offer the possibility of imagining them. Thatcher, of course, remains infamous for her battle cry "There is No Alternative", but what if there is? What if it resides not in communism, or neoliberalism or isolationism, but in these pockets of resistance, of imagination, offered up by our artists. I read somewhere that Zamyatin, like Nabokov, was a synesthete: for him words and letters assumed visual reference







Daniel Tuomey *Scene of the Collaboration (A house that love built)*  
Birch ply, timber, found stool, concrete, photographs, ambidextrous drawings  
Dimensions variable Video 9:21 min 2013



points. In such a way, he was able to perceive the world in a very unusual way, flattening a schism in sensory perception. Perhaps this is how the artist works, transforming the visible, known world, into something infinitely more necessary. By this thought, an alternative has always already been there: the artist, her gaze still fixed on the given, forges a new one, similar but irreconcilable. This new given exists: much like the artist, we must learn simply to split our gaze.

<sup>1</sup>The artists included in *built with love* were Ruth Buchanan, Declan Clarke, Kevin Cosgrove, Daniel Tuomey and Ai Weiwei.

<sup>2</sup>For more on this see: Suzanne Moore 'At least in Thatcher's day we knew what we were up against': The Guardian, 10/4/2013, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/10/thatcher-we-knew-what-against>, accessed 6/5/2013

Rebecca O'Dwyer



Ruth Buchanan *Build a wall or be a room* Table, video 8:02 minutes Dimensions variable 2008