

Compassion is Dissent

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*

The contemporary neoliberal consensus means that compassion is dissent. Following the election of a right-wing Tory government committed to an economic policy of pernicious austerity in the May 2015 election in the UK, the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home organized 'Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam' which took place on 25 June 2015 at 7pm. We put out an open call on Critical Network, the Institute's website and social media. To get in, participants had to bring their own 3-minute Manifesto. They could deliver their Manifesto in any way they liked: slam it, sing it, dance it, read it, shout and scream it if they felt the need.



Figure 1. 'It Won't Go Away' placard in front of the Houses of Parliament, London, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home.

The open call:

The Institute knows a new political moment is upon us.

The prospect of another five years of the austerity assault machine has forced us to act. We want to activate ourselves and each other in the face of this Tory-ality, this No Future. We want to realise ourselves in action, to outwit, outgrow and outlast.

How can we spread the virus of compassion, how can we find new weapons of dissent? In our small, insignificant way, we are calling for the downfall of capitalism, starting with the crumbling of the neoliberal project and the simultaneous overthrowing of the current government.

Join us. You'll be suitably rewarded with drinks and the company of fellow revolutionaries. Let us know you're coming at theinstitute@twoaddthree.org

Solidarity.

The Manifesto Slam was inspired by UK based theatre-makers Chris Thorpe and Lucy Ellison's double bill of *Confirmation* and *#TORYCORE* at the Unity Theatre in Liverpool on May 7 2015, the eve of the election, when social change for the better seemed vaguely plausible ...

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'The Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam' stage and seating was prepared by the Institute on the eve before the slam. The stage spelled 'dissent', the seating 'compassion is a way'. This stage was the result of a recent Institute Makeover, with sincere thanks to Studio Polpo, a social enterprise architectural practice from Sheffield.



Figures 2 and 3. Setting for The Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam, Liverpool, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home.

Slammers in feminist alphabetical order were Cathy Butterworth and Mark Greenwood, Gary Anderson, Jennifer Verson, Lena Šimić, Lorena Rivero de Beer, Mark Loudon, Michael Pierce, Paul Matosic (visual arts contribution), Tim Jeeves and Zoe Zontou (in absentia, delivered by Sid Anderson).

Time-keeper and **compère** was Sid Anderson. Sid also gave out prizes: six copies of *the Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels and one copy of *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists* (all purchased from the News from Nowhere radical bookstore in Liverpool, UK).

Distractors were babies Isaac and James.

Documentation was provided by Mark Loudon, who kindly photographed the event, and Gary Anderson, who audio-recorded it.



Figure 4. Introduction to the Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam, Liverpool, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of Mark Loudon.



Figure 5. Conclusion to the Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam: Sid's deciding who gets what prize: *The Communist Manifesto* vs *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, Liverpool, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of Mark Loudon.

Here are the three slams by Gary Anderson, Jennifer Verson and Lena Šimić.

Gary Anderson: back of an envelope manifesto (after *Manifesto for Maintenance Art! 1969* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles)

IDEAS

A. The privatising instinct and the collectivising instinct.

The privatising instinct: separation/isolation, individuality, self-identifying as an ego, contemporary art par-excellence, to follow one's own part to privatising, doing your own thing, preventing others with your dynamic.

The collectivising instinct: integration, returning, relying, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, common dependency, enabling others with your generosity and empathy.



Figure 6. Gary Anderson at the Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam, Liverpool, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of Mark Loudon.

B. Two basic systems: privatisation and Collectivisation.

The sourball of every privatising revolution: who's going to get paid enough to pick up the garbage on Bank Holiday Monday?

Privatisation: the systematic, cold disenfranchisement of everybody except the 1%!

Collectivisation: the consensual, warm, enfranchisement of the 99%! Joyous, erotic, fulfilling social encounters.

C. Collectivisation: is a drag; it takes all the fucking time, literally; the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom of inner power struggles – no status, no rewards, no pay – collectivist = no recognition or mis-recognition.

D. Politics: everything I say is politics is politics, everything I do is politics is politics 'politics is about who gets what, when and how'.

E. The demonstration of collectivisation.

'Manifesto Slam' would zero in on our utter opposition to the present undemocratically elected TORY privatisation machine and BRING IT DOWN.

Jennifer Verson: Compassion is Dead

Compassion is dead
Compassion is colonial
Complexity is our only hope
Hope is colonial
Hope is not based on logic
Hope is based on faith
But we can diagram complexity
We can draw a picture of our lives
We can use arrows to indicate
the flow of wealth and resources
We can use equations
to explain
that the pavement we walk on
is not ours, it's not our inheritance
inheritance as in inherited wealth
as in the Queen is not the only one
who has a right to the inherited wealth
We can use a formula
to explain
that this park
this pavement
this job centre
belongs
to the children of Harare
that this park
this pavement
this job centre
belongs to the children of Lahore
that this park
this pavement
this job centre
belongs
to the children of Addis Ababa
it's not mine.

I don't belong here
my inheritance is scattered on a
sea shell strewn beach
in the Gulf of Mexico
where Ponce de Leon searched for a
fountain of youth
and Jose Gaspar built a prison
to hold his captives
My inheritance is a heart
that yearns for justice
We can diagram justice
We can map the relationship of
the brothers and sisters
in Libya, Lampedusa and Calais
They remember this land
They remember their brothers and sisters and grandparents
giving their lives for king and country
They learned the words to God Save the King in missionary
schools in Rhodesia
They survived the middle passage
They fought Nazi armies, Fascist armies,
Imperial armies, with bayonets and machine guns so that
history could move forward in one direction
from genocide and apartheid
and a hatred of the other

so systematically manufactured
as to logically frame the placement of humans beings on
cattle cars.

We bought and sold
7 generations of Africans
We benefited from
12 million slaves
3.25 million on British ships
sailing across the Atlantic
We were on the side of
victory in 2 world wars
We buried 30 000
members of the King's African Rifles
The men, women and children
camping on the beaches of Calais
do not need our compassion
They are just returning for
their inheritance
it is the Queen that should think
about sharing more fairly
with all of the children
of the Empire.



Figure 7. Jennifer Verson at the Compassion is Dissent: Manifesto Slam, Liverpool, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of Mark Loudon.

Lena Šimić: Today June 25 2015 at 18:10



Figure 8. Lena Šimić at the Compassion is
Dissent: Manifesto Slam, Liverpool, UK 2015.
Photo courtesy of Mark Loudon.

Today June 25 2015 at 18:10 I fail again. The process of speaking, of having to speak, humbles me. These are not my words. There's this worry about the pernicious substitution of intimacy and warmth for justice, as Richard Sennett would say. Again, I am stealing here. Today words fail me. Today is too much. The summer of 2015 is upon us. Abandon hope (summer is coming!). What are our weapons of dissent? Banner poetics, a friend said. Today I will give you slogans, mostly those which I haven't invented. Today I am a producer. Today I don't invent the new. Today I am all reflection and no action. A paradox. What does it mean to begin, to initiate, to start? This is a philosophy of life, of natality, of action as Hannah Arendt would have it. Hannah Arendt, self-proclaimed political thinker, not a philosopher. Philosophy is set on contemplating death. 1. What's to be done? 2. Capitalism is crisis. 3. There is no need to fear or hope, only to look for new weapons.

A break. I'm cooking rice. My mind is steaming and empty.

**IT IS A NEOLIBERAL CONSPIRACY TO DENY US OUR HUMAN RIGHT FOR A FUTURE LIFE
THE CAPITALISTS ARE STEALING OUR MONEY AND OUR FUTURE**

My friend Zoë Svendsen writes in headlines.

Today I am reliant on you. Today I will get through. Today I am taking on your instructions on how to live my life. I'm writing this manifesto. I'm cooking rice. One action interrupts the other. These days are given over ... These months I step aside ... I work in the background. I wonder what it is that makes one start something new, an action, an initiation. How does it begin? And today Mxiolisi Norman, my student, says: 'The process of speaking, of having to speak, humbles me.'

What's to be done – next? Take to the streets ... of our neighbouring town, St Helens!

Developing anti-austerity, pro-people power tactics we write new manifestos for St Helens by invitation from the Live Art Development Agency and Heart of Glass, a St Helens based community arts project. Equipped with a bench we launch Manifestoval – a festival of manifestos – as part of the *Through the Looking Glass* Art Festival in the town (November 20-21 2015). Our research objective is to create a working methodology for the production and dissemination of dissent. To do this, as we did at home in June, we try our best to disturb the over-polite boundaries between the private and the public through the unlikely combination of live art making and family making. After some research it turns out that one of the most pressing issues in St Helens is the removal of benches from the privately owned Hardshaw Shopping Centre smack bang in the middle of the town centre. Old age pensioners, Mums and shoppers have nowhere warm to gather and rest. The local paper is full of protest and dissent about the removal of benches. We source a local, used garden bench from Gumtree for £25 and decorate the bench with stuff bought from the family run DIY store across the road from Heart of Glass. Let's take the to the streets with the bench. Let's invade the Hardshaw Shopping Centre and invite people to sit down and co-create a manifesto for St Helens.



Figure 9. Sid applies the finishing touches to the Manifesto Bench, St Helens, UK 2015. Photo courtesy of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home

We spend the Saturday morning of November 21 2015 disturbing the Hardshaw Shopping Centre security guards. We brought the bench back in. Older ladies gather immediately, gleeful with mischief. We buy them cups of tea and chat about the removal of the benches from this privately owned space. We converse. We listen to their complaints. We provide a space for compassion and dissent. Sat on the bench with people compassion and dissent feel like such a natural couple. Eventually we are moved out of the shopping centre onto the streets of St Helens. We drag the bench around the Church Square again and again. People gather and talk to us. They know what we are doing. They know this is a cheeky protest. They want some of it. They want to talk. They want to dissent. We talk to the youngsters who want a skateboard lane in the square and the older folk who want their town centre back.

Our performance contribution ends up being called *A Manifesto for St Helens by, for and of the People of St Helens* and was delivered at 3pm that Saturday afternoon. A collection of thoughts from people who sat on the manifesto bench on Saturday November 21 2015 - transcribed and delivered on the day by the Institute.

A Manifesto for St Helens by, for and of the People of St Helens

where to rest
where to rest
where to rest
when shopping

disgusting
fainting
nowhere to sit down
when meeting mum

a gathering place for the old
old people from homes
no benches
one seat
two seats
two seats

she wasn't allowed to feed the baby
bottles & jars
customers dropped off

there used to be slabs with flowers
it's their money
it's private property
where's all the benches?
it's a hazard, they said
new manager
it's private property
so not here

can't talk at the library
just want to talk
old people haven't got much left
they just want to talk
old people sorting out their shopping on benches

open tj hughes
too many pound shops and charity shops
we need decent clothes shops

oh, surprised to see the bench here
they have them in warrington shopping centre
bus pass

injury to the back
two perfectly good cafes, they said
12 o'clock for a cup of tea?

reshuffle the st helens council
church square sold off
what do we own?

you are now making them work for their money
they are finally worth it

i'd like to talk to him, a scouser
we have loads of pound shops
that's the third one that's opened
and too many bakeries
that's the sixth

make everything legal
better stores
less immigrants
no not you
it's world war three, innit?
no not you
a variety of shops
do you know how to spell that
less chavs
more clothes shops
skatepaths
we've been asking for skatepaths for two years

frank, the bench expert
facebook group, people of st helens
it will be there, your bench

there is just as much chance being killed right here
in the road

i'm going on a coastal path
we don't need any more gyms or maccies
football team's struggling

just having a mooch
with a sense of community

wall – lost of a lot of character
historic buildings, got too quickly on the
redevelopment
late 60s early 70s

replaced historic buildings
just look at, just look at
characterless, concrete monstrosities

rebuild the town centre
get rid of characterless, concrete monstrosities
new link road
outer centre ok
inner centre falling apart

heart of town centre
has been
pulled out
charity shops, betting officers
brighthouse – rip off shops

where's the money gonna come from?
guy, closing down fatface
has a 6 month lease -
here today gone tomorrow

not enough real engagement with
local population
long term project not sponsored by vested interests
we need st helens community trust
a group of people who represent
not vested interests
but a long term viable future
for this town

in other words some sort of action group

there are no benches in the hardcore centre.

The gap that is left ...

Precarity (the feeling that we are at the very edge of losing everything) is the basis of the current vile regime, the neoliberal order. To get us here it has taken the deliberate, conscious and strategic repositioning of the means of production as far away as possible from ordinary people. Agency, these days, seems almost inevitably to belong to those with the means necessary to further entrench us in sped-up consumer capitalism and its concomitant conditions. But, from working with people face-to-face at home and in the streets, listening and thinking things through with others, we get the distinct sense that the current vile regime is itself precarious. Neoliberalism is fragile. When agency is taken away from us to such an obvious extent it somehow, paradoxically, jolts us into an understanding of the gap that is left and the feeling begins to well inside that we simply must do something about it. As a family of two adults and four children we take sustenance from these insignificant actions we do at home and on the streets. Every time we do something like this people just seem to come out of the woodwork to join us. Dissent is everywhere. Compassion is everywhere.

Notes on contributor

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home are a family of two adults Gary Anderson and Lena Šimić and their four children Neal, Gabriel, Sid and James. They have been running an art activist initiative in their family home in Liverpool (UK) since 2007. They are funded by 10% of all income that comes through the family.

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