

Art as Education

Fourteen. What could anyone ever hope to know at fourteen? At that age, I remember, it was all climbing trees and scuffed knees, and the only knowledge we tried to intercept was the meaning behind the pop songs that reached our rural ears. In those days—and we're only talking about twenty years ago—if I wanted to know anything that constituted serious information, I would ask around and, when the answer inevitably failed to resolve itself conclusively on the lips of family elders, I would turn to the volumes of a children's encyclopaedia that rested their broken spines against the bay window of our study room.

Dusty anachronisms, their blue cloth covers discoloured by the harsher light of better days, they proudly puffed out their golden typographic plumage. Finding the Roman numbers that corresponded to my area of investigation, I would ease one of the books away from its compatriots, opening its hard covers ajar to savour the sweet musk that drifted upwards like camphor on the wings of moths. More often than not, the section I sought would be missing, excised by a sibling assigned to research the same subject three, five or seven years earlier, which left me

with one option: to stay in town after school, filling the three hours until the next bus left for our village with a trip to the municipal library. Just down from the fish and chip shop, in a period building with all trace of its heritage removed, I would scour shelves sparsely stacked with the desires and donations of the local farming community, hoping a member of teaching staff would have credited their students with enough initiative to warrant the surreptitious inclusion of the relevant title.

Two short decades later and everything has changed. Teenagers these days have access to more information than we ever knew existed, and can find anything they need by typing a few keywords and clicking a button. Centuries of history, and more books than anyone could ever read in a lifetime, have been distilled into pixelated paragraphs, waiting to be discovered. But, sometimes I wonder what young people do with these fragmentary facts, these partial histories and received opinions which only hint at knowledge or understanding. How do they know what to look for, what to accept and what to reject? How can they develop a perspective on the world by assembling a jigsaw of soundbites? Well, I found some of the answers to these questions last Wednesday morning.

The gallery's normally deserted on weekdays, with those few people who know about it tending to co-ordinate visits around their other leisure activities at weekends. So, the arrival of this delegation—which at first sight seemed to be part of an organised trip from one of the nearby Colleges—prompted my curiosity. The group, of a dozen or so fourteen-year-olds,

Courtesy of the artist

Katie Barlow *Visit Palestine* 2005

entered serenely, exhibiting none of the raucousness that my contemporaries would have shown on being released from formal education, and none of the gaucheness that would have dogged us in a sophisticated environment. I studied the young students as they filed past my desk and, in their un-uniform dress, could find no trace of the logos that laced the blazer pockets of institutions established to preserve official knowledge.

Without wishing to imply distrust, I followed them on their deliberate trajectory towards the gallery and took a seat against the wall, observing from the sidelines as they coagulated in the first two rows of tiered seating, happy in each other's proximity. Almost as soon as they were settled, the first shaky documentary spooled into view, and immersed envoys of the TV generation in image and sound. The silent projector spewed its digital beams onto

the screen and a boy no older than his witnesses gambolled through the rubble of his ruined town. From my place adjacent to their seats, I could see their small faces cascading with light and shadow, as unaware of being watched as the object of their attention. A soft voice introduced us to young Anwar's plight; orphaned in the conflict that had ravaged his home, he daily risked his life to scavenge for food. And, in the half-light, I could discern the shuffling of notebooks as this parallel narrative was decanted without gazes being broken.

The artist responsible for this film had been in the gallery a few weeks before, perfecting the seating arrangement and testing the saturation of colour and sound. She had spoken about her motivations while she worked, spitting vitriol at the mainstream media, its partiality and politics. A modest woman, far removed from the vainglory of others who have exhibited there, she seemed to regard herself as no more than a conduit for the information she was relaying. Concerned only with honesty, with reporting exactly what she saw, she considered it her duty to bring the truth back home to us as vividly as if

we had experienced it ourselves. And, as her messages transmitted themselves to this willing audience, I understood her project to have been a success.

As I was thinking this, a loud crack ricocheted around the confined space of the gallery, which forced us to investigate collectively. On screen, at close range, a steel-tipped projectile had seared into young flesh to leave a pocket like the crater of a meteorite, a repository for swirling sand. An abstract fissure until the blood began, we widened our forensics and understood the bullet to have embedded itself just below Anwar's jutting ribs. In the darkness, eyes blackened with sadness as a veil of horror descended and, for the first time, I became conscious of their youthful sensibilities and felt implicated, irresponsible. Unflinching faces inhabited Anwar's reality, monitoring his condition from within, and chests rose in relief as his breath returned. Less in need of protection than capable of offering it, the bones of their growing skulls set into expressions which hinted at the dissenting adults their owners would become, and my concerns for them evaporated.

When the film finished, abruptly and without resolution, the visitors were left visibly bereft. I straightened my body, preparing to join them in the exodus to reception, but there was no sign of movement. The clustered group remained in the none-too-comfortable gallery seats and the disc stopped whirring in the machine, leaving the projector to cast a rectangle of purest blue. Shifting focal lengths to lose myself in its depths, I tried to decide between Jarman and Klein. Leaning back in my chair, I rested my head against the gallery wall, waiting to see what would happen, thinking of Turrell.

After several minutes, the youngsters in the front row swivelled around in their seats to face the row behind them. A girl in the centre was the first to speak, her quizzical features set beneath a sleek curtain of hair. 'So?' she demanded of her colleagues, glowing in the blue light.

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A few of the others nodded, reticent at first, then two began to speak at once, a boy and a girl, their voices meeting at the same pitch to cancel each other out. After a small skirmish of politeness, the girl agreed to speak, 'We have to do something to help.' There was no uncertainty in her words and they were greeted with assent. The boy, who had demurred to allow her to speak, concurred, 'Why don't we go and find him?'

His proposal was met with general agreement and several of the others contributed logistics and swapped the names of people they thought could help them with their plans. They wanted to meet Anwar, to talk to him and to heal him. But, more than this, they did not just want to ameliorate his individual suffering. Determined to prevent his fate being replicated, they understood with absolute clarity that the root cause underlying this injustice had to be addressed. In the discussion that followed, laden with the passion of youth, they never doubted that they could make a difference with their diminutive presences.

Silent and unacknowledged, I was assimilated into the context of their epiphany, as neutral as the watery blue that framed their discussion. But, I was far from neutral in the opinions I formulated. As I listened, I became convinced that this education they were receiving in the gallery was every bit as important as anything they would learn at school. Without mediation, the film had exposed them to subjective truths and sharpened their critical faculties. Beyond formal constraints, this work of art had opened their eyes to a world beyond their own. It had taught them humility and empathy, and it had braced them to act. If there is hope, I thought, it lies with the young. ❧

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