

Real Society

In this conversation Phil Collins talks about *Real Society*, his contribution to the invitation made by D.A.E. (Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak) to take part in the *Front Line Compilation* programme.

Inspired by San Sebastian's unique character, he decided to organise a photo session open to anyone who wanted to share intimate expressions of their nakedness in front of his camera.

DAE On your first site-visit, *Real Society* was already in your mind as the title for a new work. This was when you started to photograph people, following them around town, trying to get to know the real society of San Sebastian; you even got into trouble when you tried to photograph a political arrest. What brought you to organise an open photo session in the room of such a symbolic hotel as the Maria Cristina?

PC San Sebastian is interesting because to many it seems homogeneous — a *belle époque* tourist town by the sea. And yet to me it seemed instead to be home to lots of distinct communities, some of a temporary nature — the foreign visitors enjoying the city — and some much more sustained — the retirees in the social clubs, the teenagers drinking *kalimotxo* in the old town.

We came up with the name, do you remember, in Lasarte, in a small bar, and soon after at breakneck speed as we hurtled home drunk frothing at the mouth we tried to convince a taxi-driver to be in a film called *Real Society* about the growth of the village in the last twenty years, which was now ten times the size due to immigration and economic patterns according to our source. The political arrest drama was accidentally for us a farce. We were in Egia and it was the night they were returning around 20 people who'd been arrested for questioning. I was thinking in fact of Genet, and how the Spanish police taking on the costume of 'criminality', (the mask in particular) revealed something straightforward, self-evident about their operations. Well, to be honest I was thinking this and taking pictures at the same time with a camera I'd forgotten to put any film in. I think it was only on the 547th picture I began to suspect something was awry.

DAE Your work is a constant trans-national journey in which you seem to be dealing with the so-called "dangerous zones" at a local and global level by interposing yourself in the situations. However you prefer to open up new ways of representing these places, with personal narration. What kind of stories were you searching for this time?

PC I recently travelled to Baghdad for a couple of weeks. There I was struck by how invisible the city is. How little we know of its mechanics. Would you be surprised if I told you I drank more Pepsi in Baghdad than in my entire life? Let me tell you, I was shocked. There's a Pepsi factory just outside Baghdad. Korean and Far East imports are also big. While it was impossible for me to get a feel of the place, how do I then communicate this to you? In the end I asked around 80 teenagers to sit for screen tests. Nothing much happens and yet it's, for me, really powerful. There's an implicit violence in the organising principle of



Duncan (2001)

the video. An imperative. Wait. Sit, and look at the camera for an imaginary Western audience, and wait. And for me, much of the invisibility of cities permits the military activity of NATO forces. The metonymic elision of the city itself and the regime — the city itself as an infernal regime — is a proposition which immediately implicates all civilians, lays the linguistic ground for an attack.

In the photo session in the Maria Cristina, I had no firm idea of who would come. Our aim in putting it together was around something people felt able to come to.

DAE *Real Society* comes from a previous work you started in Belfast called *Beautiful Boys*, which also shows the gestures of stripping. Why did you decide to keep with this series in San Sebastian?

PC I was thinking in a way of something experiential. How you would be met in the lobby of the best hotel in town and taken up to a room. How you could take off your clothes, have a chat, have a glass of wine. How you would call a mobile phone for directions. And this was the way it was organised. In some ways the pictures are less important than the treatment and actions of the participants who came. They are indeed a special and a highly prized society, born of fever. In Belfast, I'd been interested in something a little different asking young men primarily to take off their clothes in public places for a photograph. Here I was interested in the erotic charge which I think underlines much of the hypocritical prurience in the media and their description of the violence in Northern Ireland. And also the representation of young Northern Irish men in the print media, how uniformly aggressive and hard they're drawn. I wanted to think of other excised values, the delicate, the considered, the vulnerable, as part of the landscape.

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Ivan, mobile phone dealer, 17 (2002)

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DAE In other projects, such as in Baghdad or in Miami, you also call upon the public to participate in an open shooting. However, this time there are new elements, like placing the session within the context of fashion, and introducing glamour by shooting in a luxury suite at the Maria Cristina Hotel. How do these elements affect your work in relation to other methods you have used before?

PC These became great strategies for communication. And also became the work at the same time.

DAE *Real Society* also creates a dialogue between private and public; indeed, you even managed to subvert both.

PC Our debates about public works in private places lasted well into the night on many nights. The most exclusive hotel in the Basque Country. The hotel itself was a star. And the invitation to come to a room in the best hotel in town, that no-one would be turned away, and to take off your clothes for a stranger with a camera — it's a beautiful invitation and one in fact laced with a whole history of promises and dreams.

DAE The fact that this photo session involved the gestures of stripping made us think at the beginning that the turnout would be pretty low. The day of the shooting a large number of people showed up and most of them were willing to pose naked. Do you think the media coverage influenced the behaviour of the participants?

PC I think more than this, that the media interest of course was due to the nakedness, but I often wonder whether there would be a difference if it was in another city.

DAE It is also interesting the way the subjects appear in front of your camera (as in the case of work you have produced in Belgrade or in Belfast). The subjects seem to have a certain control over the situation, as if they were participating in their own performance with you. In *Real Society* you were working with this same idea of building the final image together with the models.

PC Whilst I was conscious that the shooting was structured as a gift — opening up this luxurious suite to the public — I was dazzled by the generosity of the models. Very private, sometimes intense, often heartstopping conversations were struck up between two people whilst one of us undressed. At the end of the day I couldn't talk about what had happened. These gestures of intimacy — a life history, a complication, discussions of escape, or fantasy, some confirmations of happiness were to me too delicate for repetition. And if indeed, the models had understood only too well the potential for democracy in the project I too understood only too well the kindness of strangers, and the necessity for concealment alongside revelation. Or more importantly the discontents of language in translation. In the hotel suite everybody was offered a drink and was shown around. I loved the suite. I really did. And then they could choose where they'd like the photo. And then they could go as far as they wanted. I was interested more in the awkwardness of undressing.

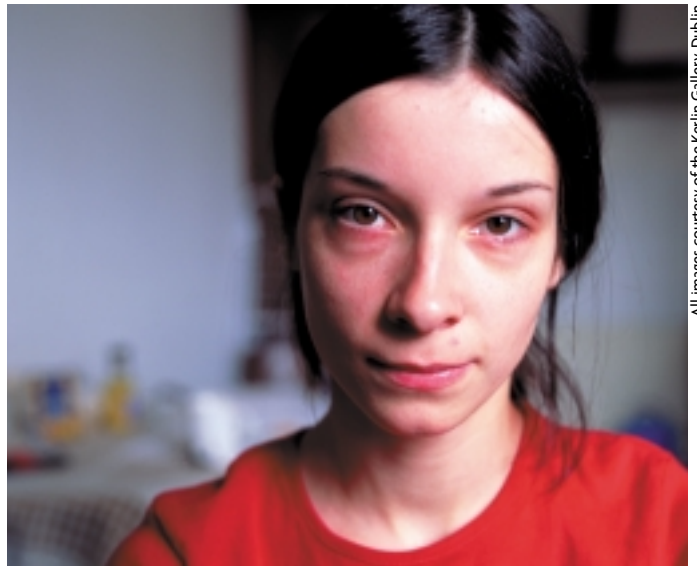
DAE However, there is always a certain element of exploitation in the production of an image once it is circulated in any medium...

PC So everything was organised as a public casting. And the casting has a set relationship between photographer and subject which we reconfirmed and inflated. One of our rules which appeared in the adverts we put out said your picture will be shown all over the world. Very quickly magazines in the United States wanted to publish the pictures.

DAE In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, he discusses how Western society has built a power-knowledge of sexuality based on the act of confessing private sexual experiences. *Real Society* came to have in a certain sense the elements of telling a secret, of making a sort of confession in front of your camera. However I remember you saying that within the shooting there was no right or wrong.

PC Whilst I agree with elements of this — the semi-private space, the potential for a therapeutic activity — just like the confessor/penitent relationship, the relationship here acted more importantly I thought as that other form of religious discourse — testimony. In some ways through their participation people also testified to their presence in an extremely intimate fashion. Of course, because it was a casting for real people the testimony was organised both around the 'authentic' self and a pose. The body and a performance (the strip). If indeed it was a confession — do you think confessors are as deeply moved as I was? Does the priest himself fall in love fifty times a day? How in fact could there be a right or a wrong? ❧

Conversation conducted by PEIO AGUIRRE and LEIRE VERGARA, CURATORS OF D.A.E. (Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak). PHIL COLLINS is an artist and photographer who lives and works in Belfast and Belgrade.



Sanja, the morning Vlada left for the army (2001)

All images courtesy of the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

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