



COLLECTIVE
GALLERY

PEOPLE FROM OFF

Anna Best, Karen Guthrie,
Nina Pope, Simon Poulter
19 May - 17 June 2001



- Interview with the artists and A Tall Tale by Royal Mile Primary School in conjunction with Collective Gallery and National Childrens Art Day
- Essay by Neil Chapman

courtesy of
Grizedale



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The Festival Of Lying

Site specificity in art is usually constructed with reference to historical resonances, or in relation to topographical or architectural features. In contrast to this, The Festival Of Lying is a piece of work which uses the character of various local communities as its map. The Festival Of Lying has been produced by Anna Best, Karen Guthrie, Nina Pope and Simon Poulter. It is the result of a collaborative artists residency at Grizedale.

Grizedale, which describes itself as an 'art in the environment centre', displays a permanent collection of works commissioned over a period of 25 years. It is tempting to see The Festival of Lying as having been developed, in part, in relation to the legacy of the sculpture park. The way in which the work focuses on the concept of 'local community' in order to find its place, seems to make a point about the kind of processes which shape our environment and social milieu; the structures which we identify in geological matter, the forces which produce the landscape, are there also in the dynamics of communities. The spans of time in question may be different but communities are layered like sediment. We are also familiar with this kind of metaphor which is present in the idea of 'social strata', but the artists' work in this instance, when seen in the context of conventionally site specific work, seems to suggest a more literal comparison. And just as an objective study in science may focus on the phenomenon which cannot quickly be understood within the common terms, so The Festival of Lying describes the artists' interest in those irregular features of Cumbrian culture which might contradict our general idea of rural life.

The work uses the form of a particular traditional event as its starting point. On one evening each year, a gathering at The Bridge Inn, Santon Bridge, awards someone with the title of 'Biggest Liar in the World'. This tradition is enacted, apparently, after one Will Ritson (born 1808), erstwhile resident of Wasdale Valley and notorious teller of stories.

The adoption of the subject of public lying by the artists here, serves a number of purposes. To begin with, it is a way of ameliorating the imposition which can be read into the arrival and commissioning of artists to make work in a place which is not their home. In incorporating the form of a local event, the artists place themselves in the background for a moment. Or the structure of the work which they are making, with its local familiarity, provides cover while the politics of the relations between locals and outsiders is negotiated. From these cautious beginnings, something quite different emerges. A number of the usual performers at the Biggest Liar in the World Competition become an integral part of the process of making The Festival Of Lying, and the competition, transmuted into a festival, is also an unfolding of the theme. It is the making of an arena in which a diversity of ideas around the subject of truth and lies can collide.

The way in which The Festival Of Lying functions as a nexus for different groups and individuals is achieved by its design as a conference. Contributions are made by Peter Lamont, researcher at Edinburgh University, on Conjuring; its psychology and its mechanics. Jon Ronson, writer and journalist, reads from his book on

extremism and American conspiracy theory. Researcher into the paranormal, Maurice Gross, is interviewed on his knowledge of the notorious Enfield Poltergeist affair. In line with the artists' fascination with the anomalies of local life, the job of comparing the event is given to Ralph Spours, a local estate agent whose particular brand of humour, tested in the slots between contributors during the day comes, one suspects, in part from his own bewilderment as to just what kind of thing this event actually is. Other local contributors testify to the same difficulty in grasping what is intended by the event. But some level of trust between the artists and those involved seems to be sufficient for the suspension of doubt.

What the various contributions to The Festival Of Lying have in common is that they each present a different entry point into the subject of truth and untruth, encouraging us to see these two as a labyrinth, the negotiation of which we are all more familiar with than we tend to be aware on a day to day basis.

But of interest to the artists, perhaps primarily, is the special relationship which truth and lies shares with art. Chosen to open up this subject at the festival is Rob Irvine, an artist who has been instrumental in the establishing of crop circle making almost as a new category in contemporary English folk art. As he describes his activities in relation to an apparently 'real' occurrence, one gets the impression of a profound ambivalence - even for him as maker of these ephemeral works - around what constitutes authenticity and fakery. His own crop circles are every bit as much 'the real thing' in so far as they are experienced by the hundreds of people who travel to see them when they appear in the fields of Wiltshire during the summer months. This viewing public would seem to comprise of different communities; from the downright sceptical to the passionately believing. The (presumably successful) use of the crop circles' powers as remedies for various ailments by this latter group, can only lead us to see the categories of truth and falsity once more insinuate themselves within one another.

The manufacture of crop circles on the model of some supposedly authentic phenomenon may also give us a way of thinking about The Festival of Lying as a new work, and its genesis in the culture of a local community. The act may appear on some level as one of replication. But if this is so, the effects of the replication proliferate, escaping the control of the original model. The web cast of sections of The Festival Of Lying finds another audience. The discussion of the event by those who attended establishes yet another network of communities. The transforming of the video footage made on the day, into a piece of work which operates as an installation in a different kind of exhibition space, is one further unfolding. Each time this growing set of ideas is sent out, like a piece of gossip it finds a new local audience in which to be nurtured, repeated and embellished upon.

NEIL CHAPMAN 2001

text available in large print

what would you ask an artist ?

Primary 3&4 at Royal Mile Primary School set the following questions for the artists. The children interviewed Karen Guthrie during the installation of the show. The others were interviewed by email.

When you were small, what did you draw?

Karen: I used to draw portraits, mainly of my family and my pets. We had a tortoiseshell cat named 'Tinkerbelle', she was quite difficult to colour in.

Nina: This is rather embarrassing, it was mainly ballet dancers - although I did a nice line in romantic portraits of my blonde '70's Afghan hound!

Simon: Astronauts, aircraft and cruise ships.

Anna: I drew ponies and horses.

Do you ever paint pictures or do sketches?

Karen: Not often. I use cameras to 'sketch', as they are faster for recording ideas.

Nina: Very occasionally - not because I don't want to, but I never seem to find time. I do sketch like plans for events sometimes.

Simon: Yes, ever since I was sixteen. I now have a drawing tablet connected to my computer which I use all the time.

Anna: I used to do ten a day from my head, now I don't. I write to myself now instead.

Did you always want to become an artist?

Karen: Yes, ever since I was very small (6 years old). I always knew.

Nina: Sort of....I wanted to be a vet when I was very small but I would of been entirely unsuited to this.

Simon: Yes, ever since I was sixteen.

Anna: No, I wanted to be a cowboy.

How did you become an artist?

Karen: I passed my exams at school and got into art college here in Edinburgh. Then I studied in London, and then started to have exhibitions like this.

Nina: I went to Edinburgh College of Art - more by luck than judgment - met Karen there and haven't looked back since.

Simon: I went to art school and liked it. I particularly liked painting and the freedom to try things out visually.

Anna: My boyfriend was doing black & white photography at sixth form college and my mum was a designer and was always very into art.

Are you famous?

Karen: (to group) "Have you heard of me before?" (giggles from group) "No?, Then I would have to say no I'm not!".

Nina: No.

Simon: I'm not famous, but some would say I'm infamous. I've been in the papers and on telly.

Anna: No.

Are there any artists in your family?

Karen: No, although my brothers are in the music business. My Great-Grandmother, who I never knew, was a keen amateur painter, and this did influence my life. (Later Karen remembers that she is related to JM Barrie, who wrote Peter Pan. This also became an influence.)

Nina: None.

Simon: No, although my daughter is very good at art.

Anna: My Grandfather was a cartoonist in California.

Is it good working with other artists?

Karen: Usually, yes. It can be difficult and fun at the same time.

Nina: It has it's ups and downs but generally there is little I like more.

Simon: Sometimes, but not always.

Anna: I need both, to work with others and to work alone.

If you have a question for the artists, e-mail the gallery at collgall@aol.com mark who your query is for. Please note that we cannot guarantee that the artists will tell the truth...

In response to the artist's 'festival of lying', the children of Miss Lambie's class have come up with a tall tale of their own, it's a whopper.

A TALL TALE

It is the year 2009, Miss Lambie rules the world. Her rules are ... no fighting, no litter, no nastiness and no stealing. We begin our tale in the kingdom of Dumbiedykes, close to the island of Arthur's Seat. On Arthur's Seat lives the evil Sir Sean with his slave alien, Tazamaniac. He is a very useful slave for he can change into anything, but usually he is a red furry ball.

Sir Sean broke all of Miss Lambie's rules, particularly the one about stealing, in fact he had made Tazamaniac transform into a magpie and fly in through Miss Lambie's window and carry away her diamond tiara. What Tazamaniac hadn't noticed was that Stinkie, Miss Lambie's pet dog, was snoozing under her bed (he wasn't allowed to sleep under the bed because not only was he called Stinkie but he smelt stinky too). Stinkie heard the flapping of wings and saw the magpie fly off with the priceless tiara. Stinkie wished that he could stop the thief, but he wasn't a very good guard dog and he had no bark.

Miss Lambie went to her room to put on her diamond tiara for dinner. She screamed when it wasn't there, "I want my tiara back". Miss Lambie had her suspicions about who the burglar was - she thought it was Vatso, the Dumbiedykes Tower ghost, who had just asked Spooky Suzanne, the neighbouring tower's ghost, to marry him. "Now, there's someone who needs diamonds", she thought.

Stinkie shook his head wishing he could bark. Stinkie went and fetched his crayons and drew a picture of a magpie for Miss Lambie. Nodding his head he showed it to her. "A magpie?" questioned Miss Lambie, "there hasn't been a magpie in these parts since 2001". Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a little clump of red fur, picking it up she smelt it. "I know that strange perfume, it's Sir Sean's alien slave Tazamaniac!", she shouted.

Miss Lambie and Stinkie marched on to the Royal Ship and set sail for Arthur's Seat. As Miss Lambie sets the rules, she also decides the punishment and the punishment for stealing is banishment from Dumbiedykes forever, but Miss Lambie had another idea as well - Sir Sean would have to wash Stinkie the dog.

Miss Lambie and the sweet smelling Stinkie sailed back overjoyed. Miss Lambie was so pleased with Stinkie telling her who the thief was that she let him wear her tiara. Stinkie was rather pleased with himself too and stood on the deck smiling a toothy grin. Suddenly he felt a bit sea sick and he leant over the side. Disaster..... the tiara fell off his furry head into the waves, he dived in and got the tiara in his teeth. Miss Lambie hauled him out of the water back on to the ship, "Oh Stinkie" she said, "You smell all fishy again!".



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