Nosepaint Remembered

Julian Stallabrass

'Nosepaint Remembered', in Margaret Garlake, ed., *Beaconsfield: Chronic Epoch*, Black Dog Publishing, London 2015, pp. 8-11.

Loophole Cinema, *Night of the Fire Cabinets*, New Year's Eve 1993, The Tannery, Bermondsey Street

In a club thronged with quite young, quite drunk folk, a group of men on a low stage thrash beer barrels with chains, and then throw the barrels around the room. In another club, the male and female toilets are linked by CCTV, which leads to some entertaining misbehaviour. In a gutted warehouse building at midnight on New Year's Eve, a similar crowd get warm—but not too close to fiercely burning filing cabinets, drawers open, flames springing from the paper.

Passersby look on curiously at a middle-aged man who calmly carries a large leafy branch through the streets of central London; outside the British Museum, he poses like a tourist for pictures.

Before Beaconsfield, with its base in Vauxhall's old Ragged School building, hard on the elevated railway, there was the curiously named 'Nosepaint', a peripatetic organisation also run by David Crawforth and Naomi Siderfin. They put together art events in streets, parks and clubs, starting with hybrid art-club nights in a railway arch not far from the Ragged School. The name, incidentally, remained obscure to many who came to those events but is old slang for alcohol strong enough to colour the nose. Joyce used it in *Ulysses* of a character 'unwashed of course and in a seedy getup and a strong suspicion of nosepaint about the nasal appendage'.

Hayley Newman, April 1994

The club events had an edge of wildness to them. They drew in lots of people who would not normally go to an art event, and their attraction was that no one knew what to expect. They mixed live music, sound art, performance, cabaret and even circus elements, along with installation and multi-media displays. Hayley Newman mic'd up the inside of her mouth, and engaged in a ten-minute-long, very public and very loud snog. When Ian Hinchliffe performed (and his nose was permanently though productively painted), the audience was provoked into reaction, usually drunken heckling, which would bring out the artist's rambling but deep-cutting responses; his performances were eccentric to the point of danger, and occasionally involved the shedding of blood. In a Nottingham night club, Bruce Gilchrist and a collaborator had themselves wired up to an electrical circuit. When they touched, and when someone in the club pressed a button, they would receive a painful shock. Sadism was set against curiosity and

entertainment, since here (in contrast to the infamous Milgram experiments) there was no figure of authority ordering people to administer the shock and absolving them of responsibility; instead drugs, alcohol and an air of collective exhilaration sufficed. Gilchrist's intervention predated the term, but would now be counted as a dark foray into 'relational aesthetics', and many Nosepaint events could be seen as experiments in activating awareness of conventional social interactions, and how they could be stretched to the point of rupture.

Relational aesthetics, though, was far from the mainstream concerns of the London art world in the early 1990s which was caught up with emerging 'young British art'. While yBa had its centre in Hoxton, an old working-class, industrial area of east London, in which hungry-eyed developers were looking for investment opportunities, and saw artists and galleries as the useful vanguard of gentrification, Vauxhall was quite different. Though central and well-connected, it had been heavily bombed in the Second World War, and the extensive ruins had been built over with massive, system-built council estates. Like many industrial areas, it had been deliberately driven into poverty under the Thatcher regime; its factories and warehouses shut down, its people turned out of work, its services run down, its shops closed for lack of local income. It was not quite as dire as some London areas further east—at least in Vauxhall the pubs remained open—but its population and infrastructure at that time, were recalcitrant blocks to gentrification.

In both Hoxton and Vauxhall, a young, alienated cultural crowd mixed with those stranded by the draining away of industry and the disempowerment of organised labour; but the difference was that in the former, real-estate entrepreneurs, new media and creative industry types were also thrown into that mix, and the heady perfume of money-making was in the air. In Vauxhall, the interactions were more desperate and sometimes violent, and the place offered a truer picture of vast swathes of the degraded nation, saddled forever (it seemed then) by an insouciantly callous and culturally backward Conservative autocracy.

That government, it should be remembered, had launched a series of legal assaults on youth's chosen expressions of enjoyment. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 targeted raves and infamously the playing of loud music 'wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats', and contained other provisions which threatened much organised dissent.[1] This lent further edge to Nosepaint's club and street events, which had no official sanction, and which often operated in areas where the Hobbesian bargain with the state—of protection from arbitrary violence—operated patchily at best.

I experienced these events partly as an ordinary viewer but also as a photographer and writer, commissioned by Nosepaint. Photography was not, perhaps, very important to the events themselves (although there were a few occasions when I remember lenses apparently outnumbering viewers) but it takes on a necessarily unwarranted significance in retrospect, so it is worth saying something about how some of the pictures in this book were made.

Lighting at the club events tended to be dim and of mixed sources, each with their own tint. To have used flash would have been very disruptive to the performers and audience alike. Modern digital cameras would handle such conditions easily, but in the early 1990s we had to use film—

[1] The bill as originally enacted may be read here: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/contents/enacted

usually one balanced for tungsten light, and kept in the developer for longer to give it a bit of extra speed. So fast film, fast lenses that drew in what light there was and gave very little depth of focus, and hoping rather than knowing that something sharp and reasonably well-exposed would end up traced on the emulsion. Naturally, all movement—except that implied by frozen action—all noise and much of the sense of interaction were stripped out in these photographs. Those of us taking pictures soon learned that there were two kinds of performers: artists who would act as if they were entirely in their own world and those who engaged with an audience. Also that there were two similar attitudes towards photographers: those who carried on regardless, and those who seemed to carry the idea of the photo-op in their heads, who would pause at key moments and before dramatic backdrops so that we could get our shots. The two sets of attitudes did not necessarily align. It could be argued that those who took no account of the lens conducted a purer form of performance, thrown into the moment and the minds of those present, while those who always had in mind how they would look in pictures had a cannier eye on the future.

Simon Whitehead, *Birnam*, 1993

Nosepaint is not well known as part of the 1990s British art scene, except among the people who attended its events.[2] Scant, inadequate documents and memories are held against the condescension of the present. The culture of the rich is trumpeted loudly, and taken as the authentic spirit of that time: the marketable, media-friendly, attention-seeking products of yBa, issued to a grateful conservative media, buoying up the reputations of celebrity artists, collectors and dealers. London, too, changed rapidly once the Labour government embraced a mild modernity, and continued to draw in the global mega-rich and favour financial capital to such an extent that many ordinary people (artists included) were priced out of the city altogether. Even Vauxhall eventually began to yield to the tide of gaudy luxury flats.

Its forgetting is no accident, then, since Nosepaint was never much about selling stuff (except beer). It worked on artists and audiences alike, hybridising media and the character of events themselves, reflecting on and changing participation, the divide between artist and viewer, performer and spectator, and on ideas about what gets called 'art' and what does not. In that sense, it had the air of an avant garde, though its integral and collective consciousness at its social, economic and political setting gave it little faith in the judgement of the future. Its effects were felt less on objects than in minds. Yet as the increasingly predominant culture of the super-rich carries contemporary art into realms utterly remote from the experience of the vast majority of people, there remains value in that.

[2] There is little literature on Nosepaint. Beaconsfield published a limited edition book of documents and photographs, *Nosepaint-Beaconsfield 1991-2000*, London 2001; and in a book about alternatives to 'young British art', I wrote an essay about a Nosepaint event, 'A Place of Pleasure: *Woodwork*, Vauxhall Spring Gardens and Making Audiences for Art', in Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass, eds., *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, London 1998.