

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

JEREMY COOPER



Fitzcarraldo Editions

1 APR 03

M
My Camden Arts Centre show opens next week. First large solo in a London public space. They're excited, I'm apprehensive.

Camden publishes a brochure for each of their exhibitions, in a design I've always liked, with wire eyepieces in the spine for box-file storage. This is for you.

With love

Lynn

Lynn Gallagher

Camden Arts Centre

April 9th to June 4th 2003

Throughout the development of any expressive form which they can call their own, visual artists tend to be inspired as much by what they read as what they see. This is unquestionably true of Lynn Gallagher, who has read massively, mostly of twentieth-century European fiction, starting as a child on her weekly visits to the public library in Sparkhill, Birmingham. Contemporary female artists with a similar predilection for reading include Sarah Lucas, who spends as much time with a book by the fireside as she does in her studio, and Fiona Banner, the widely read founder of The Vanity Press.

On moving to London to attend St Martin's College of Art, Gallagher was introduced by her tutors to the still-fashionable philosophical and aesthetic theories of writers such as Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Francois Lyotard. The most forceful influence on Gallagher, however, was the book *Ways of Worldmaking* by Nelson Goodman, teacher of analytic philosophy at Harvard University and a substantial collector of contemporary art. Goodman's comment 'Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand, the making is always a remaking' resonates all along the line of Gallagher's films which, despite their breathtaking inventiveness, are rooted in the objects and experiences of her actual life – as everything always is, it could be argued, in the art which matters, especially by women.

At St Martin's, Gallagher studied sculpture as well as painting and drawing, not photography, and was subsequently self-taught in filmmaking. Her sculptural background is retained in the sense of each film being a unique object, with its own texture. There is also a biographical suspicion that she lives and works in relative isolation from the established art world, choosing to protect herself from the standardisation of commercial and critical pressures. The result is a wonderfully individualistic body of work, little like anything by anybody else of Gallagher's generation. Often even the subjects of her films, whether people or animals, have separated themselves from society. One example of this characteristic is *Animalation*, in which the camera is focused, close-up, for the whole duration of the film on a saola, a rare species of antelope found only in the Annamite Mountain Range on the border between Vietnam and Laos. Gallagher had been seeking an opportunity to film a saola for several years, eventually doing so after an intrepid trek following

her look-out's tip-off. The mahogany-brown animal, with long, striped, sharply pointed horns, appears to be asleep in a jungle glade. A butterfly lands on its back. Three or four flies buzz around the moist nostrils. Nothing much else happens. The light changes as wind blows branches across the sun's angled rays. There is no soundtrack; the film is entirely silent. The saola may be dead.

By a curious paradox typical of Gallagher's oeuvre, sound is in fact a central feature in most of her other films, merging into the overtly musical even when derived from documentary-type recordings. The soundtracks of several of her movies are drawn directly from her live musical experiences, including regular attendance at avant-garde concerts in London. Well versed in the classics of contemporary music, works by Stockhausen, Feldman, Xenakis and the rest, she also attends improvised music performances at Café Oto, a short walk from her home in North London. She greatly admires the saxophone playing of Evan Parker; at least three of her soundtracks are influenced by his perfection of the technique of circular breathing, which enables him to produce an unbroken sound from his instrument for a full forty minutes. Gallagher also commissions composer/musicians to contribute new music to her soundtracks, including the percussionist Julian Broadhurst and the young sitar star Anoushka Shankar.

About *May Tomorrow Shine the Brightest Of All Your Many Days As It Will Be Your Last*, one of the films due to be shown at Camden Arts Centre, Gallagher says: 'The soundtrack is cobbled together from Dictaphone recordings, old 78s, hisses, scratches and whines. The title is taken from Borges; it's a letter one king writes to another, the evening before they go into battle.'

Gallagher was given her first photographic camera

on her tenth birthday, described by her as 'a present of ingratiation' from her mother's then-partner. She was instantly obsessed by the taking of still photographs, until the making of moving images came to dominate her life soon after the end of her time at St Martin's, through loan by the school of a Bolex H16. At the group show *Time Signed* at the ICA in 2001, Gallagher declined to exhibit any film, and instead mounted six different classic Bolex cameras on sculpture plinths. Occasionally she has her 16mm film telecined and then edits digitally on screen before reconverting the final article to film, whilst asserting her preference wherever possible for hand-processing from start to finish.

Solomon Anstrader

[In consultation with me, three stills from my work were chosen to illustrate this brochure and two reference images proposed by the writer, an art historian currently based in Berlin. As usual at Camden Arts Centre, the essay was written before the contents of the show were finalised, the booklet designed and printed to be available in advance of the opening.]

Dear Lynn

Found myself more interested in your exhibition leaflet than I expected. Genuinely.

What a strange way of thinking you have. Pulled it off, though, it seems.

Good for you.

Can see the CAC is a smart place to be.

I'm pleased for myself as well as for you.

Kisses, Mother xxx

15 APR 03

Mother

Comments appreciated. Would you like to come down to see it? You could stay with us in Dalston for a few days, we've plenty of room.

It's on for another two and half months, so no hurry. Let me know what suits.

Love

L

[Though not particularly appropriate, on this card I painted out in modernist blocks of blue, pink and yellow the figure of the Duke of Edinburgh in a colour postcard of Sandringham House, leaving the Queen standing alone in her cream cardigan, below-the-knee tweed skirt and dark green woollen stockings, the lake and house behind her. No dogs.]

L

What about 9th to 16th of May?

M x

[Post Office postcard.]

29 APR 03

Mother

Fixed! In the book!

Let me know the arrival time of your train and I'll meet you at Euston.

Seventeen years since we last saw each other!

Why?

My decision to stay away, I don't deny. Intentional, not by mistake.

You bear some responsibility too, Mum. 'It takes two to tango' you used to say, too often, because you knew how much the phrase annoyed me. 'We are NOT tangoing! I don't actually know what a tango is. Some kind of sexy dance? You'll've done plenty of that!' I remember shouting. Something of the same. When I was about twelve. It was the men, basically. All your men. Spongers. And drunks.

The worst was when I quite liked them. Let them touch me up. It was horrible.

You must have been as happy to get rid of me as I was to go. Stop the teenage lush interfering with your bloody men!

Nothing to be ashamed of. Loads of mothers and daughters can't stand the sight of each other. I decided not to pretend.

Not pretending now, either. Things are OK, finally.

Have you changed a lot? In the flesh, I mean. Photos deceive.

I have. On the platform, look out for a woman with very short peroxide blonde hair and a double chin!

Till soon

Love

Lynn

Dear Lynn

Before we meet, I need to tell you something.

Though you haven't seen me for many years, I've seen you. The last time quite recently, at Camden Arts Centre. So I know

you've a peroxide crew-cut these days. And that you don't have any kind of double chin!

I've come to almost all your openings, as a matter of fact. Starting with the degree show at St Martin's. I was so fed up with your refusal to come up to see me, I decided to come down. Incognito, as they say. In a reddish wig and sunglasses. Not as flash as it sounds. Dressed ordinary.

Worn the same kind of get-up ever since. Surprised you didn't notice a regular not-so-young lady in the crowd? Not that you were always at the openings. Did see you at the Susan Hiller preview in Davies Street. She's terrific, I agree.

There were times when I was so fed up with you that I nearly didn't turn up. Like your first show at Mansfield Art. Can't remember now what that particular row was about. Knowing that you wouldn't spot me, I came, though, and am glad I did. Was moved by those strange mouth photos you made. Not sure why, exactly. Actually, you weren't there anyway!

After a while, other regulars started to recognise me and chat as if I was part of the scene. Without knowing who I was. Without caring.

Sad place, the art world.

Had to stop myself going over to you now and again. To cheer you up. Could see you were bating it.

I used to stay longer than you ever did, looking at the work. I liked it all. Well, admired it all, anyway. And completely loved Sea Change Scene. That was quite something, really. I can't imagine how you've turned out to be someone able to make something like that. So completely beautiful.

All gone now, that one? Except for record photos.

I so much hope that you'll still want me to come and stay in your house on the 9th.

With love

Mother

[On receiving this letter from Mum, I telephoned her, our correspondence resuming when she returned home to Sparkhill from her visit to me]

Dear Lynn

*Wanted to say that I'm proud of my daughter. To a degree.
Owning a decent house in a more-or-less central part of London,
that's an achievement. Before you're forty.
Thanks very much for having me to stay.
XX*

[Mother wrote this on an American commercial postcard of a night attack on Baghdad, bombs exploding, buildings falling, the sky red the explosions yellow, reflected in the River Tigris.]

28 MAY 03

Thanks, Mum, I'm glad you had an OK time with us. I've followed your advice about keeping – getting! – fit. Bought jogging gear and established a three-times-a-week route.

Speed walk over to Hackney Downs and jog three or four times around the perimeter, beneath the trees, trying to see into the houses beyond the railings.

Feel worse not better!

It'll improve.

With love

Lynn

[On the portrait postcard of a grim-looking Vito Acconci, one of my favourite artists, taken at the age of

nineteen in 1959 on national service in the U.S. Marine Platoon Leader Corps, dressed in military fatigues and holding a rifle.]

13 JUNE 03

Mother

Went the other night to a concert you'd have liked. Acid Brass by a nattily alternative artist I know called Jeremy Deller. He persuaded the traditional Williams Fairey Brass Band to play at the QEH a repertoire he'd devised of acid house music!

Lynn XX

P.S. Only just noticed: Lynn/linnet. I'm a songbird!

[One of several of these marquetry-type cards that I have made, giving them titles on the backs. This I called *Her Favourite Subject*, the careful cutting out from a colour postcard of the full-length standing photo of young Queen Elizabeth at her coronation and cutting her in beside a black and white early studio portrait postcard of an ordinary young man. The visiting card type postcard of 1905 I remember buying from Camden Market, back in the eighties.]

Lynn

I can read, you know.

You've twice asked where I stayed on my visits to your previews. Didn't reply because you only ever write about things connected to yourself.

What about me separate from you? Have you a clue what it is I

care about, for myself? No, and don't give a monkey's. You're as self-centred as you've always been.

In point of fact, I used to stay the night in a dirt-cheap hotel near King Cross Station. Doss house, really. Breakfast at a great little café, Mario's. Lovely bloke. Into music. Then walk up the road to catch the train from Euston back to Birmingham. Satisfied?

Mother

29 SEPT 03

Mother

You've got me wrong. I don't dislike individual people. It's 'people' I can't stand, the in-crowd, slinking around at private views, eyes on stalks for someone more important to talk to.

I've agreed to do a show at Hauser & Wirth in Zurich to prove to them all that I could.

I wish I hadn't.

Lesson learnt.

Bridget said it would be 'good for my career' and I was too surprised by the remark to pull her up. It was arranged in a jiffy, wham, bam, thank you ma'am.

I did sort-of like the idea of H & W's old brewery on the banks of the river in Zurich. Even though I know they only asked me because of the Camden accolades. Not for my work itself.

Enough. Their money-talk turns my stomach. I'll look better after myself in future.

The press release is junk, jargon, an insult. Interchangeable with hundreds of thousands of others. Middle-man pollution.

You did ask, Mum! Now you know!

Lynn xx