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Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie

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I don't believe in a group of people called the bourgeoisie, I don't believe that artists are the lapdogs of this non-existent bourgeoisie, but I do believe that there is an exhibition at Gasworks called 'lapdogs of the bourgeoisie'. If you are the kind of person who can fit the exhibition and its accompanying symposium into your busy schedule, you are probably the kind of person who has attended another exhibition this year already. If you are that kind of person, with a diary full of cultural investment opportunities, meetings and commitments stretching well into 2007 and beyond, you are also the kind of person who, like most of us, is too busy for solidarity. If you are too busy for solidarity then again like most people, you find the concept of class to be empty, rhetorical, without meaning or social purchase, a fit subject for jokes perhaps but nothing else. You find the term working class to be deceptive – like Grayson Perry in his review of this showⁱ you will have made the rueful observation that folk who munch turkey twizzlers can earn more than those who have banned them from the dinner table. Upper class is a category, which is simply anachronistic, and absurdly monumental. Even the each way bet of being middle class feels wrong, because defining yourself as middle class is to reject the power of self-definition and choice that becoming middle class pre-supposes. This is the paradox that shapes our contemporary class-consciousness – my attempt to produce a general classification along the lines of 'the kind of person who' is undermined by the fact that this class of persons I'm describing are defined by their escape from bonds of solidarity and common destiny. If you feel that class is a devalued currency that no serious person accepts, if you feel linked to your plumber not for reasons of class solidarity but because you both have holiday homes in France, then you are increasingly in the majority – but this majority has no name. Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Pascalian Meditations*, offers a useful tripartite re-evaluation of class distinctions using the notion of three types of social gameⁱⁱ. Firstly, 'the game of

choice', which requires a future dimension and the possibility of controlling and investing in that future (typified perhaps by the phrase 'I'll see if I have a window in my diary'). Secondly, the game of chance, where there is no control of the future (here the phrase is 'Can I reach Spain on this raft or will I drown?'). The third game is that of game analysis, is played by university lecturers and artists, and requires a suspended time dedicated to thought and reflection. Here we might refer to the game analysis offered by Gillian Wearing's well-known photograph of what looks at first like a typical player of the game of choice, a young man with a neat haircut and smart suit, holding up a placard reading 'I'm desperate' which, paradoxically, seems to place him within the game of chance. It is also worth noting that since Bourdieu wrote 'Pascalian Meditations' in 1997, there has been an intensification of the relationship between players of the game of choice and the artists and academics who analyse the game, since even the minimal level of group solidarity required to get an education and secure a career with a defined future has been eroded by the injunction that good career planning should be typified by imaginative leaps, creative solutions and constant re-education. As playing the game of choice and analysing the game have become increasingly indistinguishable, they have taken on both an increasing distance from and an ethical dimension in relation to the game of chance, which is the lot of the underclass or the sub-proletarian. The power of ethical choice (no to Nike, yes to a wind turbine) unites moral consciousness with self-education in a new, updated version of the game of choice, which also marks a separation from the horror of the game of chance. For this reason, any attempt to take class seriously must work the difference between 'talking about class' which can only be done by comedians, and noticing how class causes speech – that is, how new forms of class consciousness produce analysis speech, choice speech or chance speech, singly or in combination. It is the difference between the trivial, pre-conscious realisation that my shoes may have been made under sweatshop conditions, and the way in which my unconscious affiliations with the game of analysis and choice are advanced by talking about the ethics of buying shoes. Class-consciousness and class affiliation proceeds crabwise, avoiding the older notion of affiliation-through-solidarity by asserting personal choice, ethical decision and an intellectual overview. This is why the full title of this exhibition 'Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie: Class Hegemony in Contemporary Art' is so very interesting, because it isolates the distinction between talking about class and the way that contemporary class consciousness causes speech.

If this show had simply been called ‘Class Hegemony in Contemporary Art’ fewer people would have put it in their busy schedules because it would have drawn their attention to the baleful and inescapable dimension of class, written out by the union of choice and analysis and flatly denied by the future cultural investments inked into our diaries. The addition of the phrase ‘Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie’ however, smuggles the dimension of choice and the rejection of inescapability into the discussion, because, as I said at the beginning, no one believes in either the bourgeoisie as a class, or the artistic lapdogs that supposedly serve them. So we are left hanging, between the realisation that, at the deepest level, the word class means ‘that which is inescapable’ and an acknowledgement that all things inescapable, all that cannot be affected by choice, analysis and re-education, is culturally and socially taboo.

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ⁱ Perry, G (2006) ‘You can lead a chav to culture, but can you make him think?’ *The Times* 8 November.

ⁱⁱ Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations* Cambridge: Polity pp. 221-227.