

# SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Phil  
Collins' *the louder you scream, the  
faster we go*, 2005

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Phil Collins  
*the louder you scream, the faster you go*, 2005  
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First screened at Ashton Court Festival,  
Bristol, UK

*the louder you scream, the faster we go* was a project by Phil Collins which established a video production company in Bristol to create pop-promos for local unsigned acts. This work developed throughout the duration of *Thinking of the Outside*. Collins worked with a marketing expert, choreographer and film crew and acting as Shady Lane Promotions selected three acts from solicited recordings, creating videos in locations around Bristol. The resulting promos were screened at Ashton Court Music Festival. By accepting, all musicians agreed to the wildest fantasies of a whimsical pop-svengali.

The photographer asks the Kosovar boy to remove his shirt. He's 15, he says, but his chest is still that of a child. A bullet wound circles his navel, and his leg is in plaster, right up to the groin. "Should he put his baseball cap back on?", the translator asks the photographer. "Yeah, hat on", comes the reply. After a minute or two a vase of flowers comes between the boy's torso and us. The manoeuvre, in itself modest, seems full of significance. We sense, for the first time, the presence of the video camera through which we view the scene, and with it the ethical and emotional distance that separates its operator from the stills photographer and the feature writer, who are out of the frame but whose speech we overhear. In retreating behind the bouquet, it seems as if the camera is being directed by our own feelings of discomfort at having been implicated in this choreographed exploitation of another's misfortune. Only a moment ago he was being used as a cipher for war and its victims, but now, with his head and shoulders protruding from the colourful flora, the boy - whose name is Beshar - is no longer a social type but a fulcrum of individualized ideals: youth, health, beauty, happiness, sensitivity, etc. He could be the privileged, poetic subject of a society painter circa 1890, rather than the victim of a brutal civil war. While this transfiguration takes place, the bouquet scrolls through various functions: it metaphorically dresses Beshar's wounds; it screens his modesty; it hides our shame; it pays tribute to his beauty and bravery; it consoles his pain.

Made in 1999, *how to make a refugee* is one of Phil Collins' earliest videos. Read literally, the title is misleading: the conversation between the news crew and the family, via the translator, gives little insight into the events that led to this boy being shot and his family becoming refugees during the Kosovan War. Instead, most of the talk centres on posing the boy for his portrait and, when that's over, assembling two large families (his own and another they live with) on a single sofa for a group photo: hurried directives are issued, kids and grandparents shuffled around, lenses and apertures selected and cursory biographical details elicited. In a few minutes it's all over: job done, editors happy, money wired, move on. Witnessing this callous

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process, it quickly becomes apparent that it is the media, not the warlords, who are the missing agents from the title, while the 'making' the title refers to is the production of representations of refugees by the media for mass consumption.

By the standards of Collins' other work, our awareness of his presence in *how to make a refugee*, and of what he has done to influence its outcome, is relatively slight. Elsewhere, though, manipulation is a hallmark of his films and photography. Like many artists whose work could be likened to reportage, Collins' itinerary resembles those of the world's press corps: in the last five years he has worked in Baghdad, Belfast, Belgrade, Bogotá, Ramallah, the Basque Country and Ground Zero in New York. Like his contemporaries, Collins is partly motivated by a distrust of, and distaste for, the way the media exploits subjects for the sake of a good story. He, too, directs the camera away from the flashpoints that constitute the mass of imagery we see in newspapers and on television. Apart from this, his work diverges from most neo-documentary work being made today, much of which is characterized by a sense of heightened *vérité*: long static shots of everyday activities seemingly unaffected by the presence of camera or artist. In contrast, instead of trying to negate the ideological perspectives through which events are framed, Collins amplifies them to the point where his involvement with the images becomes their structuring principle and *raison d'être*.

Parody and satire often result from this amplification of the ways the media manipulate people, viewers and truth. The video *hero* (2001-→2) turns the tables on a New York journalist who, like so many other 'lifestyle' columnists, found himself having to cover the reality of the lives of those caught in the aftermath of 9/11. Every so often Collins' arm enters the frame with a mug of whisky, from which the genial hack is obliged to drink, like some terrible reality TV forfeit or an endurance piece of Performance art. Intermittently we hear Mariah Carey warbling her 9/11 hit 'Hero'.

Oddly, what begins as an inchoate ramble becomes more cogent as the video proceeds, since segments of the hour-long footage have been reassembled in reverse order. In *hero* the techniques

commonly used by the media to manipulate interviewees and viewers become the work's content, along with the journalist's soliloquy: the off-screen loosening of an interviewee's tongue with alcohol, the colouring of the sentiments of a story through a sound-track and the strategic distortion of a sequence of events through the editing process.

In recent years Collins has departed more radically from the language of reportage. Whereas earlier work tended to result from relationships formed while living in Belfast, Belgrade and New York, for example, he now often advertises for participants. Sometimes he holds auditions, a process associated with cinematic fiction. The individuals that feature in projects such as *real society* (2002), *they shoot horses* (2004) and *el mundo no escuchará* (the world won't listen, 2004), aren't so much subjects of the work as performers and participants. Rather than inviting cameras into their lives, Collins' collaborators take leave of what they would otherwise be doing to enter a highly contrived, game-like situation. This sense of the action in his work being time-out from the continuum of life is emphasized by the artifice and exoticism of many of these projects' backdrops, which, although often provisional, signify that the participants are transported to some desirable elsewhere: in *real society* local participants have their photographs taken, in various states of undress, in repose or exhibiting themselves, by an 'international photographer' (Collins) in a luxury hotel suite in San Sebastián; in *they shoot horses* nine young Palestinians take part in an eight-hour dance-athon in a pink gymnasium; in *el mundo no escuchará* Colombian fans of The Smiths sing along to backing tracks (a note-perfect rendition of the album *The World Won't Listen* by a band from Bogotá) against photographic wallpaper of Mediterranean holiday villas and a tropical island at sunset. Despite their deeply voyeuristic nature, these works deny us access to the environments within which their participants normally exist. Rather than reducing people to interchangeable representatives of a given socio-political malaise, this process of abstraction forces us to engage with the participants as individuals, as we would someone who shares our own cultural co-ordinates. Despite this, the political reality immediately beyond the threshold of the work is barely kept at bay: the outcome of

*they shoot horses* was partly determined by power cuts, calls to prayer, a curfew and the confiscation of an hour-long segment by the Israeli authorities.

Seen a certain way, these works aren't so much series of photographs or video installations as documentations of participatory performances or relational art works. Yet this would be to ignore the way Collins' work is re-activated when installed in galleries. In *el mundo no escuchará* the 'karaoke machine' used in the original performance a monitor showing the scrolling lyrics and playing the backing tracks is displayed alongside a monitor (or video projection) showing footage of the various fans performing each song from the album in sequence. This mode of display suggests that we too can use the 'karaoke machine' for a sing-a-long in the gallery, though this desire is frustrated by the lack of microphone. In *they shoot horses* viewers are partly surrounded by two adjacent projections of the two life-size teams of dancers.<sup>1</sup> The seven hours of music they dance to Diana Ross and Joy Division, Britney Spears and Soft Cell, James Brown and Olivia Newton-John are pumped out at night-club levels, which soon transforms viewers into dancers and gallery spaces into discotheques. Its duration roughly corresponds with most gallery and museum hours; seen at a biennial, we will emerge at the end of the day almost as exhausted as the dancers themselves. This reproduction of the spatial, temporal and aural conditions of the original event within the exhibition space produces a strong sense of identification with the participants.

Collins himself speaks of wanting viewers to over-identify with the subjects of his work: to want to be them, to fall in love with them, as he says he does himself. His work, he asserts, is about love and exploitation, which, in portraiture, he sees as inseparably interlinked. The scenarios he precipitates turn the suppressed psychodrama that occurs any time a camera is introduced between people into a full-on de-sublimated melodrama. His recent works involve a literal transaction between himself and the participants: a day's wage for each hour of dancing, a beautiful hotel suite in exchange for a modelling session or, in *free fotolab* (2005), one's photos developed and printed on the condition that the artist has the right to use any of the images however and whenever he likes. But beyond that, the work also represents a transac-

tion of identities, between the artist and participants and between the participants and viewers of the work. Rather than effacing the self, as most anthropologists would, to arrive at a supposedly objective assessment of others, Collins, as a subject, is evidently part of each of these transactions.

One sign of the interpenetration of love and exploitation in Collins' practice lies in the role assigned to pop music, that most overt signifier of sexuality and romance. On the one hand, a Beyoncé CD in Ramallah inevitably symbolizes Western capitalism, yet on another level a work such as *they shoot horses* also asks us to question the assumption that a hormone-fuelled Palestinian teenager wouldn't relate on his or her own terms to *'Crazy in Love'*. It isn't so much the endurance of the dancers in *they shoot horses* that keeps us captivated as the creativity of their improvisations, alone or in synchrony. Songs well known to Western audiences, but evidently unknown to them, take on unexpected qualities: Joy Division's *'Love Will Tear Us Apart'* suddenly sounds almost Arabic. Consisting of music he loves and music he loathes, the seven hours of music Collins has assembled acts as a self-portrait. At the same time, the selection emphasises what he and the dancers have in common, while also highlighting differences between them. Where it's music he loves, the soundtrack functions as a gift: a way of enveloping those he wants to love in music he loves. Where it's music he loathes, it evokes the insidious, the insidious global spread of the most cynical excesses of the Western entertainment industry. One aspect of himself that he doesn't leave at home is his own identity as a queer artist, a factor oddly excised in virtually all commentary on his work, but which, one senses, has contributed to the formation of his distinct brand of radical cosmopolitanism and his desire to reach across differences. Plainly an undeniable irreverence, which one could call camp, arises from staging a Smiths' karaoke in Bogotá, a 1970s' disco in Palestine or re-making Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1963-6) in Baghdad (*baghdad screen tests*, 2002). Within normative patterns of sexual identity Collins' is himself Other. Instead of repressing this aspect of himself when he engages with geo-political issues (sexuality, typically, playing little part in these discussions), he

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builds it into the work through his choice of cultural signifiers, leading one to suppose that the politics of his own identity, as much as any one else's, lies behind his desire for heightened exchange. For Collins the camera is a libidinal apparatus, rather than one that reduces others to stereotypes. In his hands it gives rise to shared moments of catharsis and emancipation in the face of everyday oppression.

## Biography

Alex Farquharson is a freelance curator and critic based in London. He currently teaches on the Curating Contemporary Art course at the Royal College of Art and is co-curating the British Art Show 6. He is also producing an art book on Brian Wilson with Four Corners Books and will be the author of Phaidon's forthcoming Isa Genzken monograph.

- 1 The title is a reference to the American pulp fiction writer Horace McCoy's 1935 novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* about a suicidal youngwoman forced to make a living by exhausting herself in a marathon dance entertainment, for the diversion of a paying audience coming and going as it pleases, and to its 1969 movie version starring Jane Fonda'. Bill Horrigan, 'Happening in Mine', in Phil Collins: *yeah... you, baby you*, Milton Keynes Gallery and Shady Lane Publications, 2005, p. 39.

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