

The Family and its Discontents with The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is an art activist cell in a family home in Everton, Liverpool, concerned with dissent, financial transparency, the capitalism of culture and homemade aesthetics.

The Institute is run by a family of two adults and three kids, collectively, twoaddthree (Gary Anderson 39, Lena Simic 36, Neal 11, Gabriel 9, and Sid 4). The Institute is a self-sufficient and sustainable initiative drawing 10% of all income from its members (Gary and Lena work as university lecturers as well as freelance artists, the children receive child benefit).

The Institute is interested in social transformation and has refigured the family living space into a meeting place for artists, activists and cultural dissenters. This activity is undertaken in order to develop and extend dialogues about a 'culture' not necessarily driven by market forces.

The Institute have hosted a number of artist residencies and events, ranging from individual encounters through group conversations to theatrical performances in our Everton home. Furthermore, the Institute have presented a number of 'family performances' at various arts venues, events, protests and conferences.

Our performance making methodology is in the form of 'family picnics' which see the whole family of five munch and rant their way through performances at different venues.

The Institute has explored the notion of the 'family' and its relationship to consumer capitalism as well as its relationship to activism which has led them to host a number of 'family residencies' throughout 2011.

Here I will discuss 'family picnics' and 'family residencies' within the context of other live art initiatives in domestic spaces.

'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak.' Jacques Ranciere

Here I am talking on behalf of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. I did not dare bring the kids. It's too much trouble. It's easier for me to talk for them. I am their mother after all. Now I hope I will not disappoint you all – I have been chosen as someone with a talent to speak.

Where is a nuclear family situated?

One could say the nuclear family is a darling of neoliberal social order.

The family is however not a darling of contemporary performance practice – but it is 'in' at the moment as has been demonstrated by the invitation to this symposium.

Do we see ourselves as a nuclear family, a darling of neoliberal social order?

No, we say! We are different! We are cool! We are not to be co-opted. We do not belong in the prescribed system.

I've got a video for you to prove it. <http://vimeo.com/25324632>

We call ourselves hazardous.

'The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children' Marx & Engels

This slogan provided an intellectual context with which to question the naturalization of the heteronormative nuclear family unit which has, despite numerous intellectual and performative incursions, retained its dominant position in our current neo-liberal social order.

This quote by Marx and Engels, whilst radical and critical in its time, does not take into consideration any other formation of family, other than that which is heteronormative. It is critical of the division of labour between man and woman, but it is also reductive.

We use our position of nuclear family unit as a darling of neoliberal order – we can pass as normal, and this allows us to intervene. We argue that the site of the family is a site for critically informed interventions in the norms of the 'domestic' and the 'familial'.

Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists.

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.

The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.

Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.

from The Communist Manifesto (1848, English translation 1888)

The Institute's 'family picnics' are a performance methodology that we stumbled upon when starting to do our family performances. We were looking for a 'child-friendly' way of presenting the Institute and the issues we were concerned with, meaning which involved children with us on stage and them not being bored by it. We are interested to raise our children both lovingly and critically. What is it that will allow us to make political speeches, represent the issues we are concerned with, but at the same time keep the children busy, involved, part of the meaning... We realized that food and family picnics are a good method to both showcasing the family at work and undermining its traditional conservative structures: Daddy speaking publicly, Mummy dealing with the food and kids. All our family picnics include a combination of food and political speeches under a red banner with different slogans written upon it.

Our family picnics and performances include:

The Hazardous Family (HAZARD 08, Manchester),

A Promising Family Picnic (2 Degrees at Artsadmin, London)

A Performance Report (C Words: Carbon, Climate, Capital, Culture at Arnolfini, Bristol).

Bed-In CUT PIECE (Bed-in at the Bluecoat, the Bluecoat, Liverpool)

The Institute @ BHS with UK Uncut (Oxford Street, London)

The Family CUT OUT (2 Degrees at Artsadmin, London)

The Institute is very conscious of building on the feminist tradition of working at home and using domestic issues as filters through which critique can take place, reclaiming the slogan of the personal is political. The Institute brings its politics home, literally. In opening our own home with its inevitable contradictions and tensions, we would argue that the Institute opens the site of the domestic both critically and affectively. The Institute could be contextualised with other independent artist-led spaces in domestic settings. This context includes 25SG in Newcastle, Home Live Art in London, 161 in London, Bobby Baker and particularly her projects An Edible Family in a Mobile Home (1976) and Kitchen Show (1991), I'm With You in Clapton, Balin House Project in London, Space@Clarence Mews in London, 2 Penrhwi in Abercych, Wales, the Center for Suburban Research in Belfast, Deveron Arts, a contemporary arts project in Huntly, a small rural town in Aberdeenshire, Springhill Institute in Birmingham, My House Gallery in Nottingham

amongst others.

It is the domestic context which 'allows' for tensions, arguments, discussions – and unruly behaviour.

We've had artist residencies since 2008.

In 2011 we decided to invite artists who have kids. Our kids liked meeting other kids. We were interested to talk to other parents/artists about their experience of combining parenting and critical arts practices.

Helena Walsh, Kevin Biderman and Ella visited the Institute at the end of January. We went to a demonstration in Manchester together, we made friends, cooked, drank, kids put up a tent, we discussed critical forms of parenting and recorded some conversations around free education, the division of labour in households, children and rebellion and religion. Later on in the year, there were follow up visits to London and further exchanges. We support each others' practices as artists. We create our contexts.

Paula McCloskey, Sam Vardy, Fionn and Oisín visited the Institute at the beginning of April. We conversed about *a place of their own*, an inspiring new project in Sheffield that brings together critical arts practice and parenting. Our filmed FREE CONVERSATIONS revolved around family and art making, friendship, community and ownership. And we had a great game of footy on the beach, followed by fish & chips (for the Institute fish, for a place of their own chips) and the Institute's first ever fully vegan shepherd's pie.

Townly & Bradby visited in June. They organized a weekend event artists as parents as artists in Wysing Arts Centre back in 2009. Their residency followed up from that exchange. Anna and Lawrence were particularly interested in notions around 'play' and children's understanding of public spaces with their inherent rules. With Lawrence, Anna, Martha and Hope, we visited Liverpool World Museum, we went on a daytrip to New Brighton, we played on the playground and invented games. We recorded one of them, with kids. It was with this residency that children and their playfulness was placed centrally.

Reverend Billy, Savitri and Lena visited us in July. They stayed with us as a part of their Liverpool leg of the European Earthalujah tour. As we met Rev Billy and Savitri back in 2009, this was a perfect opportunity to learn about their experience about becoming parents and yet remaining one of the most prominent anti-capitalist activists in the US and beyond. We walked the Everton Brow and discussed parenting and safety – things one does not dare do because of being a parent, such as direct confrontation with police, avoidance of risky demonstrations etc, but at the same time shared a vision about what kind of world we want our children to be in. Savitri facilitated Gabriel's special concert to the members of the Stop Shopping choir. Climate change, sustainability and family making were the topic of our discussions amongst street actions and theatre performance.

Given that we are all parents, who are interested in the critical upbringing and education of the children, we had to do something about the threefold rise in university tuition fees and more alarmingly the increasingly rampant instrumentalization and marketization of higher education.

So we set up the Free University of Liverpool...