



## **THE GIFT IS NOT FREE - TWO PAIRS OF SHOES**

### **David Harding**

On the face of it seems rather simple - borrow a pair of shoes from a number of people who work in a huge shopping centre; exhibit each pair in its own vitrine; attach a portrait photograph of the donor along with the story of their working day wearing those very shoes. A simple, neat way of bringing to the attention of those who shop in the centre, something of the experience of those who serve them day in, day out. Simple, on the face of it, but complex too at other levels in what it offers both the shoppers who view the works and read the stories, and those who work in the shopping centre. Simple but clever and imaginative - often the simplest strategies are the best. So-called, 'reality TV', has shown that people are fascinated by the lives of other people. In this work the voyeur in all of us has been tapped to illumine the experience of those who work in the shopping centre to those who shop there who, like most of us, are in the habit of taking the shop assistants for granted. And more than that, the shop assistants, released from their anonymity, achieve a certain dignity in becoming recognised as individuals; they gain a certain sense of pride and a stronger sense of who they are. Of course the USA seems to have bred the notion of 'letting it all hang out' - the 'Oprah effect' would describe it - the urge to expose one's intimate personal details for public consumption. But in this work this is not quite the case. There are no bitchings, fights and bloodletting here. Here it is specific within a clearly defined strategy and is imbued with a generosity of spirit leading to a formal presentation within an artwork. It also takes place within a certain

kind of community. What makes a community is, of course, notoriously difficult to define and the term may be least well applied to a shopping centre. But of course that is precisely one of the issues with which this work is concerned. A shopping centre is, at the very least, a community of interest - that of buying and selling. Both buyer and seller are involved in this commercial exchange. Shopping centres are simply the latest form in which we buy and sell goods. Traditional open-air markets contribute to a sense of community just as the 'high street' does. The fact that the ever-growing number and size of shopping centres are, regrettably, killing off local shopping does not mean that the shopping centre cannot be a focus for the notion of community. This work, "A Pair of Shoes" by (2) Nicola Atkinson-Griffith, draws attention to the fact that community, or the potential for it, exists in every sector and all levels of society. The work evolves directly from the context and its appropriateness is endorsed by the fact that the employees enter into an exchange of goods with the artist and the retail outlets for, in return for their participation and the loan of their old shoes to the project, each of the participants was given a pair of new shoes, to be chosen from any of the shoe shops in the centre. The axiom, 'the gift is not free,' is clearly demonstrated in this exchange. Furthermore the artist has gone right to the heart of mindless consumerism by attacking it. The exhibiting, in various locations throughout the shopping centre, of 24 pairs of old, worn shoes in 24 display cabinets, usually reserved for the newest and latest product, contrasts sharply with the - 'you must have these' promotional pressure of purely commercial interests. And yet passers by are irresistibly drawn to this strange dislocation of normal commercial practice.

In 1992 Atkinson-Griffith was appointed, for a period of three months, the artist-in-residence to Santa Monica Place, a huge mall of 117 retail outlets in Santa Monica, California. I did not actually see the work on site but, when the artist described it to me in 1993, I was immediately struck by the imaginative audacity of the work and the quality of the process, which she had adopted. I know from experience how difficult it is for artists to make work of real consequence in

shopping centres. The owners and managers of such places are very cautious of anything that might interfere with the selling of goods. Usually they want artists to make work that will decorate, enhance or promote the centre to the buying public. Atkinson-Griffith has managed to avoid these problems by focusing attention on the employees and not on the products or the corporate image of the place and by so doing makes a dramatic comment on consumerism itself. It was this strategy made the work intriguing to me. Twenty-four workers in the centre agreed to participate. Most were strangers to each other though they worked in the same building. Involved in this artwork they get to know each other through their shared commitment to the project and forge a criss-cross network of personal linkages throughout the shopping centre, establishing new friendships and relationships. The project therefore becomes a catalyst for a new level of social interaction among employees.

In 1989 a group of artists, art critics, curators and academics, including Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Lippard and Suzi Gablik, came together to examine a range of social activist public art practices which had been developing and evolving. These practices were so far removed from public art as an object, whether the traditional memorial bronze figure, or the modernist abstract sculpture, that at the end of their discussions they formulated the term, 'new genre public art'. Lacy went on to edit a book of essays on the topic producing the groundbreaking book, 'Mapping the Terrain'. Lippard states in the book, "My own short definition of public art: art of any species that cares about, challenges, involves and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment." (2) Atkinson-Griffith's work is clearly to be found in this field. It is an evolved form of what is known as community art or, what Josef Beuys termed, 'social sculpture'.

Atkinson-Griffith's ability to engage the interest and commitment of people in her art works is a genuine and special talent. This is well demonstrated and is a key element in other works she has done. In "Lost and Found," Glasgow 1993, she

persuaded around 1500 households, stretching six miles between Govan in the south of the city to Springburn in the north, to lend her teaspoons and buttons. Out of these she created a huge chandelier comprising 1400 teaspoons, in Govan and a tower of 450 glass jars containing button collections, in Springburn. Few artists who engage in this form of social art practice have achieved both the imaginative scale and rigorous commitment to engaging so many people at such a personal level. It is this element of commitment to participation, to giving voice to the unsung, which is ennobled through an art practice that is at the core of her art. Realising this power with which she is imbued, she has used it to great effect and built her practice around it. It is a rare talent, the products of which continue to challenge the lesser and widespread art practices, which are carried out in the name of local, developmental and community art. Government talk about the arts carries the buzzword, 'inclusion', as if it was something new and challenging. It is so typical of politicians and civil servants that often they ignore the sound advice recommended by Berthold Brecht who said, "Never go forward until you have first gone back to check the direction." Inclusion in the arts has been one of the key developments in art practice since the 1960's. There are many artists with a mature practice committed to this way of making art. Government agencies and arts councils promoting inclusion in the arts would progress their policy if they sought out these artists and funded them well to continue to develop their inclusive practices. Nicola Atkinson-Griffith is one of those artists.

## Notes

1. Nicola Atkinson-Griffith is formally known as Nicola Atkinson-Davidson 2002.
2. "Mapping the Terrain - *New Genre Public Art*" Ed Suzanne Lacy, Bay Press 1995