



## Brick Lane's Day of Killing

by Patrick Wright

(published as 'Broken barrel of laughs', *Guardian*, 26 May 1992, p. 32)

A few days ago, a poster appeared in East London's Brick Lane proclaiming a 'Day of Killing' to be held once a year, or whenever 'the population level becomes dangerously high'. The event would be open to anyone able to hold a gun, and those with disabilities would be permitted to kill by proxy, so long as they had completed the appropriate form and submitted it one week in advance. Participants could kill anyone they wanted within the 24 hour period, but revenge killings after the allotted time were strictly forbidden. It was against the rules merely to wound or cripple, and participants would be expected to pay for such damage as they might inflict on property.

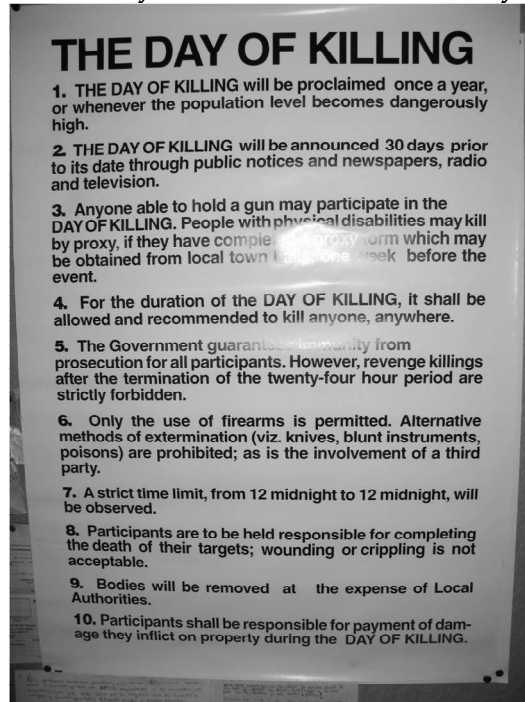
This poster, which already been scribbled over with the words 'crackpot' and 'dickhead', gave no indication of its origin. Yet any passer-by who failed to recognise the presence of Art only had to keep walking down Brick Lane to find the words 'The Day of Killing' repeated in a more revealing context: beneath a large black replica of a Beretta pistol mounted on a wall of the old Truman's Brewery, currently housing the temporary headquarters of Edge 92, an 'International Biennale of Innovative Visual Art' mounted jointly in London and Madrid, and promising 'an artists' vision of the New Europe'.

The Day of Killing is the contribution of David Cerny, a 24-year-old Czech artist who likes to work in 'strong political and social contexts'. Cerny made his name in April last year, when he equipped his fellow 'Neo-Stunners' with paint pots and led them out one night to pinken the Josef Stalin tank that stood in a Prague square as a memorial to the Soviet soldiers who liberated the city at the end of the second world war. A year on, at the opening of Edge 92, he explains that the English text for his The Day of Killing poster emanated from Prague Castle: he had written it with the help of a young American satirist, currently serving as an adviser to President Havel.

His next installation was further away, so we set off up Brick Lane to visit it. As we walked, Cerny's fellow Neo-Stunner observed, correctly, that we seemed to be in one of London's immigrant quarters. After passing the famous bagel shop and pressing on through hard streets that have seen off generations of



social reformers, we eventually arrived at the 19<sup>th</sup> century church of St. John the



Baptist, Hoxton: once noted for its Greek style and the host of heavenly angels adorning its ceiling, but now disused and in evident need of repair.

The churchyard is a little tribute to Octavia Hill and those other Victorian followers of John Ruskin who, determined to bring beauty as well as other, more conventional improvements to the London poor, encouraged churches to stack ancient tombstones up against the walls – thus opening amenable green spaces like this one, in which Cerny had installed two of his huge black Berettas.

The guns were pointing directly at one another, and seemed to be suspended in this self-cancelling pact by the large pair of golden wings that opened from each of them.

As we approached, Cerny was expressing the hope that people might see these curiously angelic weapons as existing in 'a polarity' with another he'd put near the railway line into Liverpool Street station but he stopped mid-sentence when he noticed a gang of incorrigible looking boys who were crawling all over his installation, climbing up to jump off it, running up to throw stones and high kicks at it. These unwelcome participants in Cerny's Day of Killing had been pulling at the triggers so forcefully that one had already broken off.

The unruly mob was led by its smallest member: a foul-mouthed little tyke of about seven years old, who was quite undeterred by the presence of these two visiting Neo-Stunners from Prague, and who could probably have made life difficult for the more formidable figure of Octavia Hill as well. Nevertheless, the boys made a tactical and, as they promised, only temporary retreat shortly after



we entered the churchyard, taking up new positions outside the railings to jeer and throw more stones at the artists as well as their unexpected sculpture.

While Cerny moved around photographing the works that suddenly seemed unlikely to survive the night, let alone the full month envisaged by Edge 92, it became apparent that other people in the churchyard were taking a less destructive interest. Nicholas Cassius, who described himself as a Londoner from St. Lucia, had come across these Neo-Stunners earlier in the day. Living in the flats across the road from the churchyard, he had seen the winged guns being unloaded and immediately come down to help. He had impressed Cerny by asking whether he had ever flown in a balloon, observing that this was his own great unfulfilled wish.

Cassius declared the winged guns to be 'amazing', 'beautiful', even 'sublime', explaining that he had found himself unable to turn his back on them once they were in place. He had since completed four hours as the unofficial guardian of this dream like visitation in the churchyard – determined to save it from immediate humiliation. 'Believe me, that's one horrible little bastard,' he said, pointing at the leading tyke, whose gloating face was pressed up against the railings. 'I pleaded with those boys,' he explained, going on to regret our fallen human condition: 'sometimes I wonder why we can't correspond with one another – man and child. There's too much war.'



Gesturing at the lawn, the tombstones and the disintegrating old church at the back of this troubled paradise among council estates, Cassius assured the visiting artist that 'whether you're white or black, you can't help but love England. England is peace'. Hoxton, meanwhile, was Hoxton. It wasn't that the place should be without beautiful things or promises of unlikely perfection, but they should be robustly made, out of metal rather than fibreglass.



By this time, a somewhat older man had got up from a bench, beer can in hand. 'I only come here to drink,' he said with the aggressive haste of one who maintains his dignity by denigrating himself before anyone else has a chance to do it for him. He introduced himself as Anthony Dardis, the descendant of an ancient French family that had spent the last few generations in Dublin. He too had things to say about the curious works of art that had suddenly materialised in his placid bower. 'I was perplexed to find these here,' he remarked, before embarking on a partial defence of the pack of boys that Nicholas Cassius had been fielding with such care. Cerny should have put up a notice warning that his guns, which certainly looked solid enough, were actually fragile. How else where the kids to know?

Mr Dardis's point can be pursued a little further. The nation may largely have given up on social reform as practised under the welfare state, but places like Hoxton are still subject to diverse 'interventions', albeit often made in the name of art. The housing situation may be desperate, but nowadays a poor child can hardly get into a park without having to negotiate his way through a bewildering maze of significant objects. It is not just, as Mr Dardis implied, that it takes considerable aesthetic sensitivity to tell a see-saw from a minimalist installation. Or to work out which of these many grant-aided works are designed for clambering, and which intended for a more cerebral kind of appreciation. There is also the cruder point that, in many of these playgrounds, there is now hardly room to swing a cat. If Octavia Hill were to have her time again, she might deiced to let tombstones lie, and join the local ruffians in their campaign against works of 'public art' cluttering the parks.

But another question had formed in Mr. Dardis's mind: 'I'm sorry I'm ignorant. These things are great; they're terrific, but you've put them in the wrong place. Why put guns in a churchyard?'

As we walked back towards Brick Lane, Cerny revealed that he still had an 'action' up his sleeve. On a visit to Trafalgar Square, he had noticed the large plinth that stands in the north-west corner. Unlike its twin to the north-east, which supports a statue of George IV, this place of honour has been left vacant – a touching expression of confidence that history will one day produce something to add to the nation's bronze pantheon.

Cerny, of course, had different ideas. In a warehouse at the Brick Lane brewery, he revealed another massive black Beretta – this one equipped with the legs and talons of a hawk. He had tried to persuade Edge 92 to carry out a dawn raid in which this final exhibit would be placed on that empty 'pedestal of glorification', but he sensed some reluctant on their part.



Sure enough, the organisers didn't warm to the idea. Security in the area is tight, and they would have had to hire actors and fake a roadworks even to stand a chance. The action would have been expensive even if they weren't mistaken for the IRA and shot on the spot. Besides, such confrontational tactics – derived from an avant-garde sixties aesthetic that had found an unlikely life-support machine in communism, which preserved it as a gesture of resistance – seemed a little passé in the age of corporate sponsorship and developer-led 'public art'.

Meanwhile, winged guns still hover in the Hoxton churchyard. The vicar, the Revd Malcolm MacNaughton, says he's glad to have the pieces there, drawing people's attention to the neglected building that he and his parishioners are hoping to restore. He has also developed an impressive justification of Cerny's work. When people ask him what on earth such a violent symbol is doing in his churchyard, he has taken to pointing out that the cross is a violent symbol too – and a much crueller one at that.

MacNaughton was confident that local objections would diminish once the organisers of Edge 92 got round to erecting a sign explaining the work. Unfortunately, however, it looks as if the exhibits may have disintegrated completely by the time the notice goes up. Indeed, a collection of guilty-looking kids had come to his house only the day before carrying a sizeable chunk of wing, which they claimed to have found lying on the grass.

As it happens, the vicar is used to finding angelic fragments on the ground: numerous bits of the heavenly host painted on the ceiling of his leaky church have come crashing down in recent years. But he still looks on the bright side. English Heritage has undertaken to help restore the fallen angels of St. John the Baptist to the celestial vaults above, and it surely wouldn't be past the ingenuity of Edge 92 to stick the piece of broken wing back on to Cerny's altogether more temporary exhibit.

Meanwhile, over at Bethnal Green police station, Inspector Richardson had been examining the poster announcing 'The Day of Killing', and his alarm was reported in the *Hackney Gazette*. He many not have recognised this ten-point proclamation as a nihilistic mockery of bureaucratic procedure, but he knew from the start that Cerny's modest proposal was 'a lot of nonsense'. Still, he remained worried that this prankster's missive from Prague Castle might be susceptible to misinterpretation. Brick Lane, as he explains, is a 'sensitive' area. The thugs of the British National Party are regular visitors and, following a recent double murder, there had been demonstrations demanding better police protection for the Bangladeshi community. Cerny, who had flown back to Prague by this time, knew nothing of this. But Inspector Richardson felt that his poster, to say nothing of the giant Beretta mounted on the brewery wall, might end up 'fitting into the fears' of people whose grasp of English was far from



perfect. So he went along to have a word with the organisers, who agreed not to put up any more.

Such is the final message of *The Day of Killing*: that the kind of avant-gardism that is content to make transgressive 'interventions', or to 'dramatise contradictions', can be culpable as well as stunning. The Pink Tank escapade worked because, far from being some kind of transportable, Biennale-bound aesthetic gesture, it took place within a cultural and political setting that its perpetrators understood. *The Day of Killing* lacked this essential foundation. We may be surprised that the organisers of *Edge 92* needed a policeman to tell them this, but since they did, we should also be prepared to commend Inspector Richardson and his colleagues for drawing the matter to their attention.



## [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported](#)

You are free:



to Share - to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:



Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).



Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.