

Immo Klink: *Crowd Control*

Text by Julian Stallabrass

Pigs are Humans, Too

Over the past few months, some of the students I teach have been receiving a swift and brutal education at the hands of the police and the media. The police have beaten them, detained them for hours in freezing temperatures, insulted them—and photographed them. The media have lied about what took place, ignoring the voices of the demonstrators, while relaying those of the powerful, and pretending that ‘violence’ is the preserve of the protestors (in fact, almost exclusively, aside from assaults by the police, it has been damage to property, not people). Rarely has the media clearly analysed the motives for the cuts to education funding, swallowing the government line that they are driven by the budget deficit, despite all the evidence that the new arrangements of fees and loans may turn out to be more expensive than the old. If fees had been increased gradually (as they have been frequently), protests would have been muted. The motive here was nakedly political: to manufacture a student protest movement that would stand at the vanguard of action against the coming cuts, that could be isolated, presented as frivolous and privileged, and that could be defeated so that its corpse could be paraded before those who might otherwise dare to follow. It had the added benefit of making the Liberal Democrats so unpopular for breaking their pledge on the abolition of fees, that they would be tied to the Coalition for fear of electoral execution.

As mostly middle-class people, whose experiences with the police had been infrequent and polite, the students’ views of the force have been utterly changed. They have experienced the arbitrary power that the police wield, and felt fear; they have encountered bullying, corrupt officers who think nothing of breaking the law, and above all have come to see the police as the state’s first line of violent force against its citizens.

Immo Klink has seen much of this in his systematic, skilful and valuable documentation of the broadly anti-capitalist ‘movement of movements’ across Europe. He has often photographed the police and other security forces. These photographs do not generally show the police in violent action against protestors but rather watching, waiting and manoeuvring. There is a plain political utility

in turning lenses back on the police: that they should know that they, too, are under surveillance and may not be able to assault (or even kill) protestors with impunity; and to make points about the extravagant resources thrown into the paramilitary forces that protect the state and business from democratic interference.

Klink, in his photographs of the British police, sometimes views them marching or loitering uncertainly amid bucolic landscapes, as an armoured, alien presence in images that have a similar charge to the incongruity exploited by Peter Kennard in his famous addition of nuclear missiles to Constable’s Haywain. Sometimes, they are almost reduced to the reflective strips on their uniforms, appearing as strange and distant avatars in a computer strategy game: replaceable, standard elements deployed at the whim of higher powers. To view the police like this is to see them reduced to being agents of the state machine, helmeted and faceless instruments of authority.

Yet there is a countervailing current in Klink’s pictures, seen in the clumsiness with which officers move or hold themselves, and in the hesitations of their deployment and redeployment, and these remind viewers both that the machine is far from efficient (indeed, the press is full of stories of its fabulous incompetence) and that the police are individuals. Anyone who has been pushed up against police lines on a protest knows this—that they are vulnerable and fleshy folk; some fat and unfit, some fearful, some angry, some bored—as the protestors are. The police, then, simultaneously appear as a machine and as a collection of individuals.

In fact, the protestors—the students, the teachers and the public service workers who follow them onto the streets—share much with the police. Both are subject to severe, sudden and politically motivated cuts which threaten to impoverish their lives. Both have long suffered under a quasi-marketisation of public services, which has brought with it an increasingly absurd and Kafkaesque bureaucracy of targets, audits and internal surveillance.

The individual serving such a system is caught in a dialectical development in which he or she is changed by the actions they have to perform, and in turn may make the machine more rigid and inhuman because

of their own alienation. The tensions that result, and which may be manifested in addiction, abuse and crises of conscience, are the subject of a million clichéd police dramas. Yet the dialectic may be reversed. The education cuts were never put to an electoral test, and were announced in no manifesto but, like so much Conservative ‘reform’, were planned in secret and hidden from the public. The armour, the shields, the clubs and the guns are finally no more powerful than those who wield them. What all those dramas very rarely show is the point at which police start to think, not individually as powerless bodies but collectively as a force: we will no longer attack our fellow citizens and our children on behalf of an illegitimate government. ■

Immo Klink is based in London. After briefly joining Wolfgang Tillmans’ studio he started exhibiting mainly in public institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art Castilla (MUSAC), Sala Rekalde (Bilbao), Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (Sunderland), Museo del Chopo (Mexico City), Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe (Germany). www.immoklink.com

Julian Stallabrass is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.









