

## BALLOT: AN INTRODUCTION

Depending on where you live, the moment you live in, and the prevailing political tide of one's nation state, the term 'Ballot' resonates with meaning and connotations that are variously welcome and unwelcome. In literal terms, I would love to think that the word derives from the Italian *ballotta* or boiled chestnut, as indeed it might, as we consider for instance, the darkly anonymous etymology of 'black balling'. There is also some particular evidence of this in art-related history in the Italian provinces of Liguria and Tuscany, of their voting with chestnuts at the *Priorato delle Arti*,<sup>i</sup> going back as far as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

Unfortunately, the term 'Ballot', at least for some of us, is best recited to the soundtrack of the brittle and febrile industrial relations of 1960s and 1970s Britain. I remember as a child taking great delight in committing to memory the full names of the inexplicable acronyms that infiltrated my consciousness from TV. These included ASLEF, the NUM and the TGWU; Scargill, the TUC and Ford Dagenham.<sup>ii</sup> These opaque mantras were trotted out by impossibly well-spoken newsreaders called Honeycombe<sup>iii</sup> or some such, at around 6 p.m. every evening over dinner. In contrast, the gruff, ineloquently chewed soundbites of Trades' Union spokespersons, rendered by the northern English working classes, seemed to appear - purely coincidentally - just before the latest act by the Baader-Meinhof Group. And so it was that in 1977-78, Europe's *German Autumn* was followed closely and almost seamlessly by England's *Winter of Discontent*.<sup>iv</sup>

The word *Ballot*, to my mind, is synonymous with the idea of the moral mandate to resist and an association with conflicting '-isms': Trades' Unionism, Thatcherism, ostracism<sup>v</sup> and Chartism high amongst them. By way of some antithesis, totalitarianism and fascism seem never far behind.

The grey democracy of the ballot, for us in the West, is thus contaminated by late 20<sup>th</sup> Century history in such ways and so the idea that artists might contribute, by casting their proxy (work) into a democratically 'boxed set' to enable a revisiting of the notion of the *ballotic*, is an intriguing one.

To go back to my opening note about context, and should we need reminding that the right to vote is not universally accepted, we would do well to recall the courage of Alfredo Jaar's *¿Es usted feliz?*. Created during the time of Pinochet's Chilean dictatorship, Jaar's work, *Studies on Happiness* (1979-81), invited passers-by to vote to indicate their level of happiness (or otherwise) in a thinly-veiled pantomime of democracy. In moments of dark comedy, Jaar captures on film the only means by which the Chilean people at that moment were allowed a vote. Portentiously, their votes and existence were recorded statistically and artistically at a time when the 'disappearances' of political activists, or of random individuals, were not unusual.<sup>vi</sup>

If there is a point to this text, and to the *Ballot* project, it should at least be as a placeholder, reminding us to celebrate the freedoms, or even the self-inflicted limits imposed by ourselves as voters, citizens, artists, curators, scientists. People.

Importantly, *Ballot* reinvigorates the idea of uniting a transnational community of practice at a moment when self-ostracism is seen by some as the inevitable political conclusion for post-industrial society and culture. In the face of such a bleak or pessimistic outcome, we would do better to recall the words of that gifted black American poet, Frank X. Walker who, commenting on his work *Seedtime in the Commonwealth*, said: 'There are no hard times, there is just our time...'.<sup>vii</sup>

For the record, the *Ballot* box serves momentarily to capture the collective and individual voices of these artists, their signature contributions and over-arching commitment to diversity and tolerance in practice. It sure as hell has my vote.

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<sup>i</sup> Durant, W. (1992) *The Renaissance*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>ii</sup> The Associated Society of Locomotive Steam Enginemen and Firemen; the National Union of Mineworkers; the Transport and General Workers' Union; see Paul Routledge (1999) *Scargill: The Unauthorized Biography*. London: Jonathan Cape.

<sup>iii</sup> Gordonhoneycombe.com. (2017). *Long Biography*. [online] Available at:

[http://www.gordonhoneycombe.com/Long\\_Biography/long\\_biography.html](http://www.gordonhoneycombe.com/Long_Biography/long_biography.html) [accessed 7 Apr. 2017].

<sup>iv</sup> Aust, S. and Bell, A. (2009) *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Martin-López, T. (2014) *The Winter of Discontent*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

<sup>v</sup> Durant, *The Renaissance*.

<sup>vi</sup> Rosenblatt, A. (2015) *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>vii</sup> Walker, F.X. (2000) *Affrilachia: Poems*. Lexington, KY: Old Cove Press.