

The Catfish Conundrum

An operatic exhibit for 5 singers
by **Edward Lambert**

Resumé

September 1971. The Hayward Gallery, London, mounts an exhibition entitled Eleven Los Angeles Artists. One of the exhibits, by the environmental artist Newton Harrison, is a Portable Fish Farm containing, amongst other creatures, a quantity of catfish. These are to be slaughtered during the exhibition and feasted upon by the public. The press hears about this and fuels a campaign against what is seen as cruelty to animals, an abuse of art and waste of public funds. Lord Goodman, the Chairman of the Arts Council, visits the gallery to inform himself of the issues before a special meeting of the Council is convened to decide whether the exhibition should go ahead. Outside the gallery Goodman meets protesters, including Spike Milligan, the comedian. The Council decides

eventually in favour of the artist, but with stringent conditions about how the fish are to be killed. Lord Goodman dissents believing issues other than animal rights were at stake. Harrison's exhibit is prophetic: the farming of catfish flourishes, and in 1987 Ronald Reagan issues a Presidential Proclamation declaring 25th June of that year National Catfish Day.

Sources:

- Contemporary newspaper articles
- www.theharrisonstudio.net
- Brian Brivati: 'Lord Goodman', Richard Cohen Books, London, 1999
- Arnold Goodman: 'Tell them I'm on my way', memoirs, Chapmans, London 1993
- Lord Goodman: 'Not for the record', selected speeches & writings, Andre Deutsch, London 1972
- Wikipedia (Catfish, etc., National Catfish Day)
- 11 Los Angeles Artists, catalogue of Hayward Gallery exhibition 1971, Arts Council of Great Britain

CAST

A Catfish (*soprano*)

Lord Arnold Goodman, Chairman of the Arts Council (*bass*)

Spike Milligan, a protester & celebrity comedian (*tenor*)

Newton Harrison, the artist (*baritone*)

Ronald Reagan, later President of USA (*mezzo-soprano*)

Chorus: *members of the cast*

INSTRUMENTS

Electric violin & electric cello

The Catfish Conundrum

Scene: an art gallery.

Overture: *during which the Catfish is caught and placed in a large glass tank*

Catfish

There exist three hundred species like my species:

We're known as...

"Mud cat"... "polliwogs"... "chuckleheads"...

... we're famous for our barbels

which function in murky waters

as receptors for smell and taste

combined into one yummy sense!

We are negatively buoyant:

so I sit on the river bed, and scavenge whatever I come across.

Toothless, I suck it in... (*sleeps*)

Chorus

"The public electrocution of sixty catfish,

which is due to take place at the Hayward Gallery today,

has been condemned as..."

Milligan (*protesting*)

A spectacle of slaughter! Murder most cruel!

Chorus

"... part of an art exhibition

flown in from the United States

at the invitation (and expense) of the Arts Council."

Goodman (*reading*)

"...at the invitation (and expense) of the Arts Council."

That's me! Tell them I'm on my way!

Chorus

"...the doomed catfish are part of an exhibit called 'Portable Fish Farm'..."

Goodman (*bursting in*)

Why was I not informed? I want to see for myself...

Milligan

An abattoir posing as art!

Goodman

Is this humane?

Milligan

Catfish on death row!

Goodman

Electrocution viewed by the public...?

Milligan

...gaping in the gallery:

then Catfish consumed at a feast!

Goodman

What does the artist say? What's this all about?

Harrison

Why this uproar? It is simply - art!

Goodman

Is public funding for a fish farm appropriate?

Should that be promoted as art?

Milligan

Murder! Execution!

The killing must be stopped!

Harrison

The dimensions of art are defined by the artist:

this exhibit demonstrates self-sufficiency in fish.

Why these fantasies of disaster?

Catfish (*at prayer*)

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.

Hosanna in excelsis.

Harrison

Living and dying should be understood!

Killing and eating should be intertwined!

The task of survival is worthy of art;

no question's more crucial for us at this time.

Goodman

Who may style himself as artist?

Does that grant entitlement to murder catfish?

Milligan

It's a joke, but the joke's on us:

we're paying! And how much?

That they won't say, there's no price on the menu!

Harrison

Humans should know their food sources.

Goodman

But must they witness this slaughter?

Milligan (*brandishing a hammer*)

I have with me a weapon,

and if needs be, I'll use it!

Harrison

Harvesting turns into a feast,

the killing transfigured by celebration and aliveness,

redeeming the hardships of the people!

Goodman

Life's certainly hard for the catfish which fall into your hands!

Milligan

Catfish on Death Row!

Harrison

This work costs one per cent of a Rembrandt:
to me it is high art!

Milligan

Art indeed! One per cent art! One per cent skill!
If the Arts Council fries fish tonight,
then they might as well scribble a moustache
on the face of the Mona Lisa!
(laughing and cheering are heard)

Harrison *(preparing his filleting knives)*

Moments when reality no longer appears seamless
and the cost of belief has become outrageous
offer the opportunity to create new spaces -
first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.
My work begins when I perceive
an anomaly in the environment
that is the result of opposing beliefs
or contradictory metaphors.

Milligan

What bullshit! The artist is a fraud!
This is nothing but a con
which deconstructs human activity
reducing life to vapid banality,
and through animal torture and cruelty
produces instead of art such a profanity!
It reminds me of Roman rituals!
I'm going to smash a window!

Goodman

Science demands that food be sustainable,
but killing in public is not justifiable;
and whether it's art is questionable.

Harrison

Art is relational, analogous to nature,
planetary eco-systems shatter, so does art;
gone are the stifling referential works of old.
Behold - a self-sufficient survival resource!

(Milligan smashes the glass doors)

Catfish

Miserere nobis!

Milligan

Let the catfish live!

Goodman

They will: longer than your average kipper, no doubt!

Harrison

Philistines! Bureaucrats! You - *English!*

Chorus

*So the show goes dark while talks are held.
For nearly three hundred people who were to have attended
the feast there was disappointment:
nearly one hundred pounds of dead catfish
flown in to supplement the fresh 'harvest'
were put back on ice. Into storage went the ingredients
for one thousand 'hush puppies' of cornmeal cakes,
twenty-five gallons of iced tea, and one gallon of wild honey
which would have gone into a traditional American riverside feast.
For the reprieved catfish there is some discomfort:
the tank is now over-stocked.*

Milligan

Victory! Justice!
The fish swim peacefully...

Goodman

...for now.

(reflecting)

Subsidy should not impose censorship:
artists can and must be controversial.
But is freedom of thought and expression at stake
unless we allow this performance to take place?
There should be no liberty in the land
to violate public space with presentations
of a vulgar, coarse, gross and repulsive character.
To murder catfish seems an absurdity:
this puerile concept compromises our sanity.
It bears no relation to art and reeks of decadence and indecency.
American doughnuts dipped in honey: yuk!
Let the space be devoted instead to work that is beautiful,
to celebrate artistic skills and refresh the soul!

Chorus

*A special meeting of the Arts Council determined that to close the exhibition
would interfere with artistic freedom...*

Harrison

Besides, if the catfish are not to be killed,
how else are they to be disposed of?

Chorus

*...but at the same time it decided not to accept the killing of the fish in public
as a feature of the work; the artist has agreed to adapt it accordingly.*

Goodman

We adopted a practical view
and abrogated the moral aspects...

Chorus

*Struggling with cotton and rice,
farmers in Mississippi long ago diversified into catfish farming,
ideally suited to the climate and to the aquifers of the Delta.
It's now a multi-million dollar industry
which uses state-of-the-art methods of aquaculture
to furnish American consumers with a nutritious delicacy ...*

Catfish

*(Harrison catches, kills and fillets the Catfish,
as the latter recites the Lord's prayer)
Pater noster, qui es in coelis,
Sanctificetur nomen tuum,
Adveniat regnum tuum,
Fiat voluntas tua,
Sicut in coelo et in terra.
Panem nostrum quotidianum
da nobis hodie,
Et dimitte nobis debita nostra,
Sicut et nos dimittimus
debitoribus nostris. Amen*

Reagan with Chorus *(as a feast is served)*

“PROCLAMATION 5672:

IN RECOGNITION OF THE VALUE OF FARM-RAISED CATFISH,
THE CONGRESS, BY HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 178,
HAS DESIGNATED JUNE 25, 1987, AS “NATIONAL CATFISH DAY.”
NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
DO HEREBY CALL UPON THE PEOPLE
TO OBSERVE THIS DAY WITH APPROPRIATE CEREMONIES AND ACTIVITIES.
IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I HAVE HEREUNTO SET MY HAND
THIS TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF JUNE,
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD NINETEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-SEVEN,
AND OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
THE TWO HUNDRED AND ELEVENTH. RONALD REAGAN.” AMEN!