

## 'GANGHUT'

Spike Island, Bristol  
27 and 28 August 2004

Reviewed by Jenny Brownrigg

'In 1972 a crack commando unit was sent to prison for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum-security stockade into the Los Angeles underground. Today still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire ...' – 'Ganghut'!

Fast-forward to Summer 2004 and the 'can-do' spirit of the 80s' American TV series *The A-Team* was alive and well at Spike Island for the culmination of Kevin Reid's three month residency. The premise: for Reid and his team to build a compound housed in Spike Island's gallery space, where the ten core artists (Kevin Reid, Andrew French, Steve Murray, Derek Lodge, Jason Nelson, Peter Dibdin, Graeme Roger, Luke Collins, Amy Marletta and Mark Hunter) would live under a benevolent regime instigated by Reid, allowing them the freedom and support to collaborate and engage in unexpected contemporary art activities. The outcome: an energetic two-day 'Ganghut' event with art, performance, music and video screenings, gathering all resultant work with contributions from other artists and non-artists.

This unit may not have been on the run from the military, but there were definite army undertones. A watchtower governed the space; the artisan uniform of the green boilersuit monogrammed with 'Ganghut' insignia had to be worn by the core group at all times; the audience was ordered at one point to fill all available seats or else the film programme would not begin; and a glance into the sleeping quarters revealed ten identical regulation camp beds and sleeping bags. Moreover the predominantly male 'Ganghut' artists were restricted to base in order to work. As one participant wryly observed, he felt he was re-performing Joseph Beuys' *Love America and America Loves Me*, the 1974 action where Beuys was wrapped in felt, stretchered to an awaiting ambulance and taken from JFK airport to René Block Gallery in New York to share the space with a coyote named 'Little John' for 5 days, then returned to the plane again by the same means. The member of 'Ganghut' had been flown in on Easyjet, brought directly to the gallery, had no idea what Bristol looked like beyond the gallery walls and would exit the experience under the cover of darkness on the rock-bottom cheapest early morning flight.

'Ganghut' achieved the kudos of an underground movement in this polite English setting because the artists had infiltrated the building with a different, raw kind of art. A blood smeared Scottish Lion Rampant flag hung defiantly in the centre of the space; one memorable line from an artist's video, utilising earthy Scottish vernacular, read 'Judi Dench's Arsehole'; the DJ playing from the watchtower irreverently interspersed Pearly King & Queen ditties with upstanding Church of England Hymns; the mottos stencilled on one of the compound's wall echoed solidarity and defiance in the face of authority 'Resist with all our Creativity' and 'Other Forms of Struggle'; and a fully functioning still, making moonshine branded as 'Bronco Juice', operated within the compound grounds. The architecture of Spike Island also contributed to this air of illicitness with the vast hangar-like space being overlooked by a surveillance platform that leads to a complex of studios housed by local artists.

Yet 'Ganghut' are no strangers to peddling their form of contemporary art to a potentially hostile audience. Amongst the group's previous art alter egos is a hermit – aka Graeme Roger – whose straw-thatched hut was pissed upon then set alight by some fuelled up local youths in North Wales (during Grizedale Arts 'Roadshow' in 2003) who were resolutely unconverted by the message. However, on this occasion, 'Ganghut' – through its energy, openness, humour and ideals – transcended any potential accusations of it being a closed club or in-joke. The showing of Walter Hill's *The Warriors* (1979) typified 'Ganghut' ideals – its main premise being that if all the street gangs joined into one powerful super group, colours could be taken off and all would leave as 'civilians not soldiers'. Such a sharing of territory and meeting of minds was typified by Bristol purveyors of art über pop, Super Group Extreme's opening gambit of 'It's nice to be in Scotland'. The femininity of works like James Ireland's pink neon, Fymo and wood assemblage or core member Amy Marletta's thread and fringe drawings also worked well against the stark masculine lines of the compound. Val Norris' comic *Skulls vs Ace of Spades*, which features a foul-mouthed Bambi being tamed by the gentle hobby of Ikebana, was the perfect accompaniment to 'Ganghut'. A further highlight was Stacey Matthews' 'mockumentary' on the life of her alter ego, the overweight leading man Jeronimo Blezzard, as he unsuccessfully tried to mimic the slickness and animal magnetism of a pursuit scene from the film *Bullitt* (1968).

My abiding memory is from the last night, an impromptu magical moment when life met art. It became apparent that two of the audience goers were celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary the following day. Reid played *It's a Wonderful World* and the couple danced cheek-to-cheek as everyone in the compound joined hands and danced in a circle around them. Then, in truly crap DJ fashion, the music lowered for Reid to change the line '... saying I love you' to '... saying ... George and Sue'.

Ganghut. Installation view. Photo by Peter Dibdin

