

Living Room

Nicky Bird

Alison Marchant, *Living Room*. Working Press, London, 1997, 140pp, b/w illus, ed of 500, £9.95, 1 870736 40 0.

Alison Marchant's installations and site specific works have long been preoccupied with how contemporary art can map and excavate 'the half forgotten histories' of working-class people. Her first bookwork, *Living Room*, is the result of working with people who live and work in the Holly Street Estate in East London, and continues the artist's exploration of these themes. Her previous working methods are brought to the book, combining her use of oral histories and found photographs with Marchant's own political motivation and class history. However it is in the particular artform of the book that issues of art, artist, class and community come to rub against each other in some unforeseen ways.

The format of the book is square, hard-back in a grey dust jacket with the text in a plain no-nonsense black typography. Accompanying the text are black and white photographs tracing the history of the Holly Street Estate from Victorian terraced housing through the notorious 70s tower blocks, and their recent demolition, to the current rebuilding of new low rise flats. These banal images, both in photographic style and subject matter, come from three main sources – a local resident's family album, Hackney Council archives and the artist's own documentation of the Estate. The book is divided into three sections: Marchant's introduction outlining the Holly Street Estate project, followed by transcripts of interviews from the residents talking about the changes to their estate over a 50-year period; their accounts of living through redevelopment unmask the realities behind such corporate language,



but the interviews are also ambiguous texts where even the most positive voices reveal how emotional life is determined by the material one: 'I still like it around here because I don't know where else to live'. *Living Room* concludes with the artist conducting an interview with herself about 'being working class and an artist (asking myself some questions)'.

This move – from the voices of the residents to the voice of the artist – adds a strange poignancy; unlike the artist, the residents were talking to the artist with some sense, however fraught, of community. The book ends with the artist talking to herself about her previous works and her own class position. This raises some awkward questions: is *Living Room* a document of a project, an artist's source book or a kind of retrospective of the artist's career? Her strategy may be to combine all three in one book, but these do not bind together easily and expose some of this bookwork's conceptual difficulties in which design and content make a significant impact on each other,

Alison Marchant page spread from *Living Room* 1997

and consequently upon the reader. This, in turn, raises questions about who the audience will be for *Living Room*. It is clear that the artist wants to speak to the people from Holly Street Estate. One of the important things about Marchant's practice is her ongoing concern with how artists work with non-art communities, and how to bring this work into the contemporary art arena. But how will an arts audience, which has also been exposed to the work of a whole group of artists from working-class backgrounds who are now part of the art establishment, read this book? Will they find the book's combination of subject matter and its design so austere an experience that it might lead to their refusal to engage with the issues Marchant is exploring? You would indeed end up talking to yourself.

Marchant uses both the introduction and the conclusion of the book to articulate why

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an artist's class background is important to the production of art which is 'not conditioned by appearance and stereotypes but informed by my own class history'. This leads us back to identity politics and the spectre of nostalgia. Marchant is well aware of the dangers of a practice which combines oral history and old photographs, so she is careful to point out how the project is not nostalgic. However, like some of the interviewees who remember happier times on the estate, there is an undercurrent of nostalgia in the artist's voice. Is this for a fixed, easily identifiable working class identity, or for an era when a politicised art practice was not a dirty word, or for a lost past? Placing this voice alongside those who have – in the face of municipal planners, poverty, rats, constant noise pollution 'got to put up with it' – is a risky juxtaposition. *Living Room* does raise the question of how an artist in the 1990s can overtly investigate questions of class without being didactic, defensive or lapsing into outmoded identity politics. Any artist concerned about the central theme of *Living Room* should read this book, not just for what Marchant sets out to do but also for the difficulties that haunt the book and its author. ■