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Featuring
Pictures from the Pole:
Feliks Topolski's Users Guide to the Twentieth Century

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PICTURES FROM THE POLE: FELIKS TOPOLSKI'S USERS GUIDE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY JEFFREY DENNIS

Countless visitors to London's South Bank complex, funnelled from Waterloo Station towards the river along a dank row of railway arches, will have paused by the neon-lit display announcing *Feliks Topolski's* Memoir of the Century, the words arranged in a jostling arc of serif lettering so determinedly uncool for so long that it was starting to look rather fashionable again.

Through the adjacent window they may have noticed an obscure contraption, supporting what appeared to be a painting on rollers, perhaps a mechanical contrivance for changing scenic backdrops. For those on their way to the Royal Festival Hall or the Hayward Gallery, the entrance and signage gave out confusing signals. What was this place: an annex of Madame Tussauds or a themed diorama from an Edwardian fairground? They may have ventured through the not-so-welcoming black doors, into a tour of a dimly lit labyrinth of jutting panels, upon which painted figures clamoured for attention: half-remembered politicians from the black and white newsreels endlessly repeated on All Our Yesterdays or the yellowing pages of their parents' attic collection of Picture Post, Black Power activists, punks, transvestites, Royalty and the Catholic Church. In other words: a typical, fun-packed evening in late Twentieth century London, somehow surviving into the new Millennium in this damp grotto, while all around the urban makeover gathered momentum.

To understand where this came from we need to rewind. By the time Hitler had marched into Topolski's homeland, the artist was already busy establishing himself as illustrator of London cultural and political life. War Artist was a job description he subsequently filled with zeal probably unmatched by any of the other artists recruited by the War Ministry. He worked in every 'theatre of war' (I've always thought that was a curious and illuminating figure of speech), and his drawings must owe some of their nervous twitchy energy from being made in conditions of very real mortal danger from guns, bombs and torpedoes. It is a draftsman's paradox that his loose wire-wool of lines seem able, even under these circumstances, to capture acute observed detail; an ability to convey body language which enabled him, for example, to make trenchant observations of Britain's faltering mastery over its colonial subjects.

His drawings' edge was probably also honed by the artist's reflection on his personal situation. Along with thousands of other Polish he was a refugee, albeit a relatively comfortably assimilated one. His drawings of the various categories of 'displaced person' are amongst his most memorable. But his studies of the dead eyes and stoop of his compatriots massing at recruiting stations in the Soviet Union, women working at an evacuee camp in Tanganyika, or civilians cramming into air raid shelters were merely rehearsals for depictions of scenes in 1945 that Topolski, to his horror, must have realised he was ideally equipped to record: the bundles of rag and bone barely able to separate themselves from the heaped dead of concentration camps at Belsen and Papenburg.

He published this last collection,

Top: **Entrance to The Memoir**

Above: **Feliks Topolski at work on The Memoir**

Both Courtesy of Feliks Topolski Estate
Photograph by Jeffrey Dennis

together with his courtroom record of the Nuremberg trials – a glum row of Nazi potato heads awaiting their fate – in the first of his two remarkable post-war achievements. *The Chronicle* was a broadsheet graphic newspaper published fortnightly from his studio between 1953 and 1982. It was almost a precursor of the 'blog'. He had already published, in the manner of another European observer of the English Gustave Doré (an artist with whom he felt some affinity), a number of books of reproductions of his work, but The Chronicle enabled him to circulate to subscribers, at minimal cost, his accumulated past drawings and add new collections gathered on his travels, reflecting political developments: the Congo Civil War, Vietnam, China, the Black Panthers, CND and the Civil Rights Movement. Even as television and press photography entered their most vigorous phase, here was an individual artist using technically rather modest and traditional means, somehow holding the attention of a worldwide audience and reflecting current events. He seems even to have established a happy symbiosis with television, being commissioned by the BBC to produce portraits to accompany the Face To Face series of celebrity interviews.

Despite this pragmatic relationship to new technology he had chosen to remain essentially a Nineteenth century artist, largely ignoring all of Modernism's various strands. His interest was in the 'human heap', singly or collectively, lent pathos and drama by the fall of light and shade. Repeatedly in his drawings, and the paintings worked up from them, tangled figures – crowds running through the Blitz or abject prisoners of war – accumulate in scurrying, indivisible scrums that recall Delacroix's Massacre at Chios or Gericault's Raft of the Medusa. Single figures – a fez-topped Egyptian, a Burmese potentate straight out of Conrad, George Bernard Shaw as a whiskery thicket, Bertrand Russell as a mastodon skull, Gandhi as a bespectacled turkey, Hastings Banda as a series of geological folds, Moshe Dayan with features and eye patch all clustered in the middle of a boulder face like the finger holes in a ten-pin bowling ball – are usually viewed from slightly below. They become tapering, crumbling edifices, probably harbouring nesting petrels in their upper reaches.

But his second achievement was *the Memoir* itself, begun in 1975, and in terms of form, a radical development: both a painting and 'installation', conceived before that term had fully entered the everyday discourse of contemporary art. He must of course have been aware of other artists' experiments in 'happenings' and 'environments'. It was a gamble, in many

All: **Views Of The Interior Of The Memoir**

All courtesy of Feliks Topolski Estate
Photograph by Jeffrey Dennis

ways a 'folly' (The Chambers Dictionary defines this rather English phenomenon as: 'a great useless structure, or one left unfinished, having been begun without a reckoning of the cost'). Topolski might have happily continued into old age responding to portrait commissions, travelling with his sketchbook and publishing his *Chronicle*, but he had also worked on a succession of increasingly large paintings since the beginning of his career, rising to the challenge of recording broad sweeps of history or state ceremonials. These had culminated in the grandly entitled *Cavalcade of the Commonwealth*, painted for the Festival Of Britain in 1951 on a wall adjacent to the railway arches that subsequently became his studio and *the Memoir.* His experience of these large projects fuelled the idea of a more radical and ambitious 'environment of painting ... ultra-organic, untidy, assertive and muscular...' which of course would feed on the vast archive of drawings from his travels, stretching from the beginning of his career into the future, 'a visual diary for as many yards or curving, twisting miles as I shall last'. He continued to climb a five metre high scaffold to work on it until the week he died, shortly after his eighty-second birthday in 1989.

The scale and sequential nature of the work meant that he could not build up the dense entanglement of figures and space of his smaller paintings. Its structure relies instead on a series of interlocking blocks of bright, flat colour, within which spectral masques are enacted in scumbled paint between visitants from the artist's sketches and memory, like Dickens' ghost of Christmas Past. The artist included an actual cell door from the old Newgate Prison, perhaps evoking in visitors the uneasy sensation that they were the successors to those who paid to peek at the mad, bad and dangerous in London's asylums and dungeons.

Flatly-lit photographs of sections of *the Memoir* can do the work a disservice: they may appear to be rather dilute versions of his drawings. They do not reflect the experience of walking around the site, with its low light and abruptly angled walls. The best installation shots capture this expressionist aspect of what is, in effect a 'gesamtunstwerk' (total work of art), in the tradition of the grotesque, which also presages Ilya Kabakov's melancholy antechambers and Mike Nelson's dark-themed warrens.

Although the nature of the space within *the Memoir* has prompted obvious comparisons with Piranesi's engravings of subterranean prisons, and even the painted caves of Ajanta in India, Topolski's initial conception of this free-form work was more forward-looking and contemporary: related to his growing interest in how paintings could be animated through film. It may have also arisen during his discussions with colleagues in architecture, literature and the theatre with whom he imagined an alternative, interactive centre for the arts, a 'Fun Palace': '...an expandable, shape-changing structure of service towers, lifting gantries and building components. It will emphasise 'do-it-yourself' participation of the public and will contain potential setting for adult toys, star-gazing, science-gadgetry, hide-aways, rallies, kunst-dabbling, theatre-clownery, dancing.. ' (this could be a blueprint of the future Tate Modern!). But the experience of *the Memoir* may also bear comparison with the conjectured function of cave paintings of the Shamanistic rituals – possibly fuelled by hallucinogens – of early humans. Despite Topolski's declared view that psychedelic experiences were merely an inadequate compensation for the mundane levels of perception enjoyed by most non-artists, you may ponder whether some of the mutating, shifting forms within the Memoir even owe something to an earlier experiment with LSD, during the artist's brief inveiglement into the circle of Timothy Leary in New York.

By the time *the Memoir* was formally opened in 1984 London had enthusiastically endorsed the *New Image* revival in figurative painting. During the previous few years the paintings of

Georg Baselitz, Philip Guston, Francesco Clemente, Anselm Keifer and Markus Lupertz had all been the subject of major shows. It would be easy to imagine Topolski's work also being critically reassessed in this context. That this did not happen is down to a number of factors. His drawings had been seen everywhere. He was not an enticing prospect for ambitious curators looking to break new ground. He was also increasingly disenchanted with the art establishment. He saw his studio-arch, with its built-in print workshop, as both a self-contained refuge from the *'mercantile art world'* and the means to communicate directly with his wider audience without the aid of intermediary dealers and museum directors. We must, however, weigh his professed contempt for 'art bureaucrats' against his ability to work his canny charm on real bureaucrats, politicians and aristocrats, enabling him to acquire and hang on to his large studio and exhibition space in the heart of London.

Perversely, his knack for self-publicity and his readiness to make himself completely available to his public may have also been a factor in his marginalisation by critics (that graphic display over the entrance to *the Memoir* certainly attracted attention, but possibly lacked gravitas). Around this time other artists in London were starting to host 'open studios' – usually rather begrudgingly, to stimulate sales or meet the requirements of public subsidy – for perhaps one weekend a year, presenting spruced-up work spaces and some warm Chardonnay to selected guests. Topolski, by contrast, had opened his studio (both on the South Bank and his previous base in Maida Vale) to all comers every week since 1951; unwavering hospitality that sometimes attracted less-than-welcome interlopers as well as a steady flow of celebrities. His open-door policy was counterbalanced by a steadfast refusal to be drawn on deeper psychological drives or beliefs underpinning his work. His

Top: **Fold-out Spread Of Concentration Camps, 1945 and Nuremburg Trial, 1946**

Bottom: **Images Of Belsen, 1945**
From The Chronicles Nos 1-2 Vol V111 1960

Both courtesy of Feliks Topolski Estate

Top left: **Long Island, Miami, Martin Luther King And Hubert Humphrey**
From Chronicle Nos 1-6 Vol X111, 1965

Bottom left: **Moshe Dayan From The Chronicle**
Nos 10-162 Vol X1, 1963

Right: **Bob Dylan From The Chronicle**
Nos 1-6 Vol X111, 1965

All images courtesy of Feliks Topoloski Estate

active years corresponded with some of the most traumatic events wrought and endured by humanity, and the role that he commandeered for himself — the witness — throughout those years appears to have left little time for the self-analytical probing that for many other artists is formative. His appreciation and encouragement of his contemporaries is not in doubt: a youthful Lucian Freud was, amongst many others, an early visitor to his first studio, and it was left to Topolski to organise a welcoming banquet for Picasso's rare visit to an otherwise rather unwelcoming Britain in 1950. He could also be abruptly dismissive: his analysis of the work of one of his contemporaries, Henry Moore, who sat for his portrait, as 'accessible modernity roughened up by association with the past – by a securely non-revolutionary peasant-craftsman, not a jumper-above-his-station' reveals professional jealousy and antipathy to the project of abstraction, but also demonstrates the incomer's acute observation of British class matters and an awareness of Modernism's grip on the art establishment. This disdainful distance from the internal politics of art movements perhaps sprang from being simply more interested in other things. In his autobiography *Fourteen Letters*, encounters with other artists are frequently mentioned but do not move the plot along as significantly as they might in many other artists' life-stories. As he surfed the tsunamis of the Second World War, the Cold War and the counter-culture of the Nineteen Sixties, it is the major political upheavals and their impact on people that preoccupy him, interspersed with an impressive succession of amorous liaisons.

Of the above-mentioned figurative artists enjoying the spotlight as Topolski was writing his book, Baselitz is singled out for wry scorn. He decided that the latter's 'upsidedowness' must either be a cynical sales strategy or a manifestation of cultural topsy-turvy. Given their shared hinterland of war and its aftermath, and even some formal similarities in their painting, I fantasise that I might have been able to persuade Topolski that he had more in common with the German painter than he had assumed. In both artists' work there is a tussle between psychological insight and metaphorical content. It is easy, both in Topolski's entanglements of scarified pencil lines and the putrid flesh tones of Baselitz's early work, to perceive direct embodiments of the abject. Both artists, at different points in their careers risked sacrificing this directness of expression to experiment with forms that might embody more complex responses to the times that they had lived through, a sort of index of socio-political relations.

Towards the end of his book Topolski describes going to look for the remnants of Daguerre's Diorama on the edge of Regents Park. Until last year it was in the balance whether his own *Memoir* became another mythologised, lost artefact – like Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau – or managed to win sufficient resources to continue as the unique manifestation of a personal journey through the Twentieth Century. When I last visited the *Memoir's* premises – its interior stripped out in preparation for an attempt to stop rain trickling from the railway tracks above – half-forgotten sections of paintings were still being pulled from dark corners, barely visible under the dust, shot through with woodworm. Delicately manoeuvred into the light, images were deciphered, faces remembered. Like the Belsen survivors drawn by Topolski some sixty years before, their message seemed to be: *'I am still here. I have endured'.*

All quotations are from Felix Topolski, Fourteen Letters, 1988, Faber & Faber, London

The newly restored Memoir of the Century is now open to the public. See: *felikstopolski.com* and a major retrospective at the Museum of London is planned for 2010

Top: **Cover Of Chronicle**
Nos 1-6 Vol X111, 1965

Courtesy of Feliks Topoloski Estate

Bottom: **The Firewalkers' Maid - Jeffrey Dennis**
2008
Oil on canvas
(46 x 41cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Richardson Contemporary Art, London

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