



Siraj Izhar's public lavatory

by Patrick Wright

(published as 'Two loos, low trek' in the *Guardian*, 27 September 1995)

'It's about black and white – a metaphor.' Siraj Izhar is trying to help a sceptical BBC television producer who is about to film his latest Strike project for a documentary in which six 'ordinary' people from Derry will be seen getting to grips with contemporary art. We are gathered on a pavement in Spitalfields, the historic immigrant quarter just east of the City of London. Cars thunder by on Commercial Street. Homeless men hang around in bunches, and an unexpected column of tourists passes by, tracing Jack the Ripper's bloody trail with the help of a seedy-looking guide.

The scene is dominated by the looming front of Christ Church, the vast and largely disused church by Nicholas Hawksmoor that has found such a mixed cult in recent years. Embraced by conservationists, it has also been drawn into necromantic fables by writers such as Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd. Leon Kossoff's recent paintings of Christ Church were shown at the Venice Biennale this year.

Christ Church is home to the musical concerts of the Spitalfields Festival, but Izhar's venue, which stands only a few yards away, is less grand. It is a defunct underground lavatory of the Victorian variety – a defunct gentleman's convenience, with iron railings, lunettes in the pavement, and a tall, nautical-looking ventilator designed to expel foul stench above the passing stroller's nose.

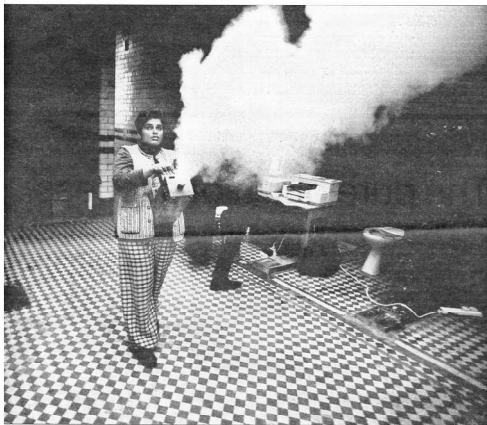
When the time comes, the assorted audience descends into this subterranean ruin. The urinals have been broken off at floor level, but some cubicles remain, as does a green door bearing the word 'Attendant'. Other adjustments have been carried out by Izhar and his associates. The white tiled walls have been blackened with blow torches. Sirens wail, and the whole place is full of artificial smoke. A recorded conversation is playing. One participant is a gay activist with Outrage, a campaigning organisation which harries the Church of England about its attitudes towards homosexuality. Pretending to be a born-again Christian, this fellow is confessing his quandary to a church counsellor who, unaware of the

tape recorder, tries to coax him back on to the straight and narrow path of 'sexual wholeness'.

As this liars' dialogue continues, a series of white ping pong balls start falling through the smoke. Izhar lies down on the floor, and an assistant starts shoving

Some still wander in for a pee, but the underground toilets at Spitalfields have become an avant-garde intersection between art and activism. **Patrick Wright** investigates

Two loos, low trek



Ut your convenience... A Strike arts activist does her stuff at the gents' lavatory next to Hawksmoor's Christ Church. PHOTOGRAPH: SEAN SMITH

the balls into his mouth, prompting him to lean forward repeatedly to spit them out at the blackened walls. The party from Derry have managed to restrain themselves until this point, but they start to guffaw as one of their number mutters: 'That is not the only load of balls in here.' By the time they are ushered out of this dank chamber, where art has given way to amateur dramatics, Izhar has fired a naval flare and the lunettes at their feet are glowing flagrant orange.

Like many of our less than immediately comprehensible avant-gardists, Izhar tells a great story. The son of a Bengali surgeon, he has lived in Malta and spent time at Liverpool University before working with the architect Hassan Fathy in Egypt. When he came across the derelict public lavatory, he recognised it as a place in which to 'initiate projects'. 'I see it as a context,' he explains, and certainly not 'a space' of the sort that might ever be converted into a conventional gallery. 'You can't author a context,' he insists.

Having found their place in the ruins, he and his fellow Strike artists set out to 'prospect' for new forms. What, asks Izhar, does it mean to be public these days? The historical city has been surrendered to Thatcher's belief that 'There is no such thing as society'. Having got to know the derelicts and the prostitutes, who



used to operate here until the Spitalfields vegetable market was relocated to make way for new development, Izhar observes that this marginal and often outcast population is 'very articulate when it comes to understanding how this city works.'

The redundant public lavatory has heaved with spasmodic and peculiar activity ever since 1992, when Izhar got to know the owner and initiated the Strike project. Some people still wander in for a pee, but most understand the difference between a wrecked public convenience and an unconventional venue dedicated to the intersection of art and activism. Katherin Shonfield and Frank O'Sullivan plastered the interior with white feathers – an installation entitled 'Dirt is matter out of place'. Morgan Doyle spent a long period cleaning the place and talking with prostitutes. Nick Charnley, said to have lived in the lavatory when he himself was homeless, put on a show concerned with 'the experience of waiting', in which a passage from *Waiting for Godot* was played on a sound system salvaged from skips.

Strike's artistry may be questionable, but the wider story of the venue is intriguing. The disused public lavatory was sold off by Liberal controlled Tower Hamlets council in April 1990. Competing bidders still pushed the price up to over three times the reserve, and the place went to a local Asian businessman for an extraordinary £85,000. The sale fell through soon afterwards, when the purchaser had second thoughts and walked away from his deposit. The lavatory fetched £31,000 when it was auctioned for the second time in February 1991.

At the time of the auctions, a certain anti-Thatcherite disbelief was in the air. Had we really got to the state where even a derelict old gents could be privatised and turned into a brasserie for yuppies? The yuppies seem to have fallen away since that more buoyant time but, in Spitalfields at least, the brasserie idea is still evolving. The owner, Mr. Aluazi, has gained planning permission to convert the public lavatory into a restaurant. The consent allows him to place a steel and glass canopy over the iron railings, and to establish a seating area on the pavement above the lavatory, sealed off with what the architect promises will be a 'heritage-sympathetic' barrier of stone and iron railings.

This seems an unlikely prospect, but the anonymous restaurateur who looks forward to managing the enterprise explains that the intention is to create a café and wine bar 'to serve the intellectual community'. Siraj Izhar will oversee the cultural programme, and the lavatory will work like a club for artists, writers, film makers. There will be poetry readings and facilities for showing films; it will



be hooked up to the internet too. They are 'aiming for the mainstream' – not necessarily Bengali, although a blend of cultures would be just fine. All that is needed now is the money. As for the vast church a few yards away, 'We are very conscious that we must not detract from Christ Church . . . We are going to be complementary . . . it will be a nice development, and we hope their patrons will use us too'.

Izhar is somewhat blunter on this matter. The fact is, he says, that Christ Church is 'a bastion of the heritage industry'. It may be a little unfair to call the conservationists ghetto-ripping gentrifiers whose restoration of Georgian houses involves 'cleansing' the area of Bengalis. Indeed, the campaigns director of the Friends of Christ Church, Roland Jeffery, is far from the imagined Spectator-reading lover of dadoes. Yet the public lavatory project causes him concern. He explains that the sale was originally contested because it was far from certain that the Liberal council actually had the right to sell off this delicately placed amenity in such a regardless manner. He worries that the proposed design is 'quite unworthy of its place just outside a grade one listed building of European significance': and he won't buy the suggestion that the wine bar scheme is in any way an expression of Bengali identity: several pubs along Brick Lane have closed precisely because they are not used by the Muslim majority in the area, many of whose members are devout teetotallers. Critics have long suggested that conservation is only the polite face of gentrification, but the same question is now asked of Strike's art, which certainly doesn't appeal to the New Georgian sensibility: is it anything more than a cultural front designed to ease the planning application?

Christ Church has long been offering soup and salvation to the indigent, and other reservations are expressed by Graham Marshall, who now runs the Crypt as a detoxification centre for unanchored alcoholics. Given that the Ten Bells was already there on the corner, it was difficult to object to the idea of alcohol being sold on the pavement, but Marshall still wonders how the 'sophisticated people from this trendy new bar' will get on with his clients as they sidle up to beg or to nick their drinks.

Those particular drinkers remained mute in the background last Sunday, when Izhar faced his six critics from Derry. The discussion took place in the Ten Bells, after everyone had watched a video of Outrage members 'zapping' a church service in Belgravia with signs reading 'Lesbian Avengers' and 'Queer to Eternity'.



Questioned about his white ping pong balls, Izhar ventured that they might be bombs or the word of God. He had one in his pint of lager as he spoke, and was keeping it submerged with two fingers: it was, he observed significantly, a full-time job keeping the thing down. The people from Derry looked as if they'd seen enough blackened buildings and religious bombs in their time. One commended Izhar's social stand, adding that while the issues were important, the realisation wasn't good enough. Izhar replied, 'It is unfair on art to insist that it has to give you a message'.

The people from Derry headed for their minibus, shaking their heads. They hardly noticed that Siraj Izhar's accomplices were completing their show by pumping ping pong balls out into Commercial Street, where they were instantly crushed by cars.



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