

# VOCAL

This essay, put together by Kirstie Skinner, is based on the responses and ideas expressed in a VOCAL conversation between the following people: Emma Henderson, Rose Ruane, Matt Carter, Mel Brimfield, Jill Brown, Jenny Richards, Siobhan Carroll, and Kirsten Body.

In *How to be Hospitable*, the Free Collective, (Dave Beech, Mel Jordan and Andy Hewitt), have made a series of billboards and displayed them in locations around Edinburgh and Leith, as well as in the gallery. Each billboard features the three artists in a different scenario.

In one, they stand in Brick Lane, amongst props and words that make up the slogan 'Immigrants of the World Unite.' Their expressions are unreadable – Beech looks 'off', Jordan seems to be snarling something, and Hewitt smiles blankly to camera. Is this a straightforward protest, or are they posing? It looks like some sort of fashion shoot, or album cover, or maybe a 1970s street performance piece like those by Adrian Piper. The theatricality of the scene is emphasised by their portable proscenium arch. Although it approaches agit-prop (the genre of travelling political theatre that originated with the Russian revolution), it seems less sincere, more knowingly artificial. Are they really appealing to 'immigrants' to unite? By putting themselves in the picture, they seem to 'sign up' to the statement; but the terms of the slogan are so ambiguous and broad, (and impossible to act on), that one wonders if their 'real' motivation is veiled.

In another billboard, the artists crowd together with tea mugs that say "I am a local outsider", "I am a foreign citizen", "I am a migrant worker". Although their smiling faces appear quite convivial and sympathetic, their role-play is unsettling. There is a touch of irony to these (self-contradictory) phrases to begin with, but as the artists' own stories are clearly in contrast with the slogans they are brandishing, the irony becomes almost sarcastic. Of course, drinking tea is a national institution – a perfect way to 'be hospitable'. Are the artists parodying a builder's café, exposing the complex social mix and tensions that underlies the camaraderie of the British workforce? Or are they targeting the language itself, and mocking the political and cultural

institutions that use such terms to group people together and address their supposed needs? Would anyone willingly refer to themselves in such terms? The first impression is of strong personal statements that are humorous and self-deprecating, but soon the phrases start to seem emptied out, hollow.

The third billboard, which appeared in the city with text but without the images, is arguably the most provocative. Here the artists dress up in schlocky costumes, each representing a different stereotype: one is in a black afro wig, one, a 'see you Jimmy' hat, and the other wears a headscarf like a burkha. They poke their heads through three holes that look like stocks, or else the painted boards of a seaside attraction. It is as if there is a deliberately failed attempt to be both sinister and humorous. Above their heads is written: 'Fight against multiculturalism', and below: 'commodifying your difference'. This refers to the idea that multiculturalism might be responsible for creating stereotypes, rather than getting rid of them. Using academic language makes this slogan more difficult to grasp than the others; and by dividing the slogan in two, it becomes open to ambiguity – 'Fight against multiculturalism', for instance, might also be a rallying cry for racists.

These billboards are located on hoardings where we expect to see advertising, or perhaps government messages. Such posters use direct language: to sell you something, or tell you something. In such locations, Freee's billboards appear ambiguous. For all the trappings of a campaign, and the provocative nature of their statements, the message remains unresolved. The artists' true motivations are enigmatic, but what is certain is that with their seemingly artificial poses, misfiring humour and their ambiguous messages, they are challenging their audience to think again about the language of sloganeering and activism.

'Their smiling faces unnerve me...'

To hear extracts from this and other Vocal conversations for yourself, go to [www.collectivegallery.net](http://www.collectivegallery.net) and click the VOCAL PODCAST tab.