

Avant-Garde 1997

Our proposal for the ‘Brighton Seafront Public Art Commission’ took as a starting point the representation, myth and collective memory of Brighton, England, as a Bank Holiday destination for displays of public disorder by rival gangs of ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’.

We proposed to make a billboard-sized enlargement of a news photograph of Brighton’s first May Day ‘riots’ in 1964. This would have been installed on the Aquarium Terrace, the scene of the actual riots.

Brighton Seafront is connected to the history of military conflict along the coastline and beaches of southern England. The 1960s generation of British youth was the first not to undergo National Service after the Second World War, while also benefiting from the economic prosperity of the postwar period. The Mods’ and Rockers’ rebellious behaviour and conspicuous consumption carried enough symbolic effect for them to be initially represented and dealt with as a significant threat to the established order.

Decades of cultural reference and quotation are now interposed between the present and that original time. By re-presenting this iconic photograph, *Avant-Garde* would have interrogated the use of photography to structure imaginative access to the past.

Avant-Garde considered how male violence becomes variously suppressed by the State, presented as spectacle in popular culture, or valorised and incorporated into official history. Yet the photograph tells little of the complexities of class and gender in an important, albeit hedonistic, struggle against the restrictions of society. As an official commission which aestheticised youthful rebellion, this project would have been an example of recuperation, the process by which the social order is maintained.

The expression ‘avant-garde’ derives from a French military term, which was later used in revolutionary politics. Under Modernism it became a term of critical approval for experimental arts. As the term became widely used to describe anything fashionable or novel, it finally reached exhaustion and fell out of contemporary use.



Proposed location for *Avant-Garde*
Aquarium Terrace, Brighton, England, 1997

Overleaf:
May Day ‘riot’
Aquarium Terrace, Brighton, England, 1964
Courtesy of Brighton Local Studies Library

