

DEADAD

Iain Sinclair on Andrew Kotting

From the balcony, seven floors above the coast road, I watch the pepper-grey beach disdain its nuisance presences: nightfishermen, scavengers sweeping the shingle with metal detectors for small change lost in the spasms of last night's courtship rituals. Dog valets. T'ai chi soloists. Convivial drinking schools, cans raised to the world, enjoying the last cocktail party in England before being tidied away, out of sight, into that sinister under-promenade with its extruded viewing chapels (tidemarks of bright blue tin). In season - early June to mid-October - regulars perform their stately laps across the bay, not far out, drifting with the tide. Frequently coupled for moral support, for the affirmation that the experience is survivable, they wallow and tussle, necks stiff, heads high above the tannin scum: leathery seaweed, wads of yellow paper. They tiptoe out, speeded-up Benny Hill, over sharp stones, to neat piles of folded clothes. The watched, towelled down, returned to their balconies, rusting rails and anti-gull devices, become the watchers. A slow-motion cinema of such tender boredom that they will never move again.

Along the seafront they come, the ordinary eccentrics, the premature revenants. The hoopbacked old woman with the doll-child in an ancient pram. The naked man wrapped in his inadequate eiderdown. The teetering albino-blonde lady in cylindrical black, regular as a tramcar in her solipsistic excursions; remarkable in that she doesn't have an accompanying pet, just the feeling that one is missing, that she pauses, drops a shoulder, sets her pace to accommodate this absence. There is something schizophrenic about having the sea on one side and the road on the other; promenaders forget how to turn left or right. Unanchored thoughts and fantasies flow directly to the horizon, without

ever coming into focus. In a daze of refracted marine light, they find themselves, these self-hypnotised actors, in the same De Chirico painting: interior as exterior. Sleepwalkers sunburnt on one side. Magically, they avoid collisions. They float towards no particular destination, with no motive beyond movement itself; a beating of the bounds. The mirage holds until the first siren sounds, the first squad car, the first ambulance. Until the spell is broken by a person who insists on carving through the lines of permission, the drowsy contours; a stubbly bruiser who bounds through the traffic, down to his favoured gap in the rocks, before striking off towards France; leaving his tolerant companion, a girl (his daughter), sketching on the shingle shelf. I've seen this man before, on film, his own film, when the pace was beginning to flag, hurling himself fully-clothed into the Scottish sea. He'll swing outside a speeding camper van, mugging like a chimpanzee, death-defying grin, before he improvises a bit of business around the act of hauling his broken leg into some nervous Highland waiting-room. I recognised this reverse asylum seeker, at once, as the performance artist and memory cannibal, Andrew Kötting. Umlaut rising above the lunar o of his surname like a pair of ice-blue staring eyes, too mad to blink. There are only four Köttings to be found, so he tells me, in the United Kingdom phone books. If anyone is looking.

This stretch of the south coast, well-used to invasions, helmeted Normans to coachloads of professionally unimpressed new Europeans, runs from the exploitable heritage set of Hastings Old Town to the surreal beach colony of Pevensey Bay. Marooned spectres of modernism - De La Warr Pavilion, the shell of Bulverhythe Lido, Marine Court in St Leonards - collaborate with colour-uncoordinated huts, modest hives and tottering Regency speculations in which weatherbeaten old ones are grateful to still be old. Dues paid, they free to gaze out on grass and silver road and high, bright clouds. The derision of yellow-beaked gulls.

Walking home with my wife, from Bexhill to St Leonards, we

become part of the spectacle, this Sunday afternoon parade of the dislocated: now we are the prey of all those windows, those little balconies. Sunlight flashes on binoculars and polished bald heads. We don't pay attention - it's very much what we expect - to the monster inflatables dressed in their Gilbert and George outfits, attended by a squabble of kids and cameras. Art. It's only art. A man in a tight suit is trying to force air into two face-painted condom figures. He is tethering them, reluctant windsocks, against the stiff breeze. And this too is Andrew Kötting. A chaotic, sponsored, family-friendly invasion: of the past. An excursion to a place that is no longer there. Performance rituals invented to reanimate immediate ancestors who are dead, buried, scratching at the curtain of soil. Kötting's father and his father's father in their new skins. They came here before, blood in their veins, breath in their mouths, to inspect the car showroom tucked away beneath the hulking ghostship of Marine Court (which was commissioned in 1934, one year after the launch of the *Queen Mary*). Now the cars have been replaced by a funeral home of naguehyde recliners, remedial mattresses and stuffed bears staring at fake coal fires. Kötting, it seems, is making another film. An exorcism of his deadad, a dragging Hamlet-burden of memory and guilt. This father, a difficult man, coffin-boxed against hope of reconciliation, will be paraded around the world in the form of a gigantic unorificed sex toy.

Kötting's art is physical, manic and remorseless: seaside postcard Herzog. A project is not worth undertaking until the primary metaphor has revealed itself, difficulty. Hills to run up, impossible objects to be manoeuvred, actors to be converted - by dirt, drink, labour - into human beings. I relished the spit and sweat of his feature film, *Filthy Earth*, the faces and the voices. The way it opens with a young woman, wiping thick gobbets of bull sperm into her cardie and talking about her father. 'He's dead now.' *Filthy Earth* disappeared from the circuits before anyone noticed that it was there. I loved *Gallivant*, Kötting's jaunt, in camper

van, around Britain's ragged fringes: the zany precursor of television's all too sane *Coast* series. (Those smooth explainers never tire, never get sick, never threaten each other. And they never say why.) Kötting did the hard miles with his lively grandmother, Gladys Morris (a voice), and his daughter Eden (a presence). His expedition begins on the pebbles alongside the De La Warr pavilion.

I walked with Kötting to view the pyramidal tomb of James Burton, founding speculator of St Leonards: you peep inside through a convenient slit. He grabbed my camera, held it at arm's length and snapped a double portrait. But when we met again, by arrangement, at the spot where I'd witnessed him shooting his family with the inflatables, he didn't recognise me under my woolly cap. He wanted to show off his studio and to explain something of this new project, *In the Wake of a Deedad*, which was both a film and an installation. The resolved *Deedad* material would be exhibited at the Herbert Read Gallery (University College for the Creative Arts, Canterbury).

The Hastings studio, cold in winter, looks down on an open-air chess arena - which, in season, is assaulted by Morris Dancers, green fools, bikers, tame Goths, blueskins with nothing left to tattoo except their eyeballs. Kötting has set himself up, inside this sail-making loft, with a garden shed. A hut with a heater. Here, twice sealed from the world, he reminisces about the journey he made, the spillage from life into artefact: black and white photographs, home movie footage, drawings by Eden, letters from friends. And bushels of porn. The outer chamber is stacked with tastefully framed images of pink people doing pink things; limited scenarios enacted, with limited enthusiasm, in budget-stopover hotel rooms of notably strident decor. Several women, who have dressed in a hurry, stockings and suspenders, no underpants, get to work on a man who looks very much like Andrew Kötting. Negative nurses, in black PVC, attempt to inflate a benign corpse, to resuscitate slack flesh, crank a dead engine. They step back to admire their

handiwork, their victim. It is Kötting, every time; he confesses. The story cooks the glue of memory: his father, a house in the suburbs, a wardrobe. His older brother, Pete, was short. Kötting calls him a dwarf. Pete had to climb on young Andrew's shoulders (sturdy, rugby player), in order to reach into the dimmest recesses of the anti-Narnia wardrobe in which their father stored the magazines he brought back from his European travels. *Private*, they are titled, white lettering on blue: 'Solange and Anne Swinging', 'Hardcore Sex-Clubs in Germany', 'Profession: Architect'. Contraband carried through the green channel among dad's spare shirts and samples, his belts and buckles (he traded in leather goods). The Kötting brothers avail themselves of this material, hot adolescent shame, then return the fabulous screenplays to their intimate perch. Their privacy. Later, much later, Andrew realised that the father must have been aware of the activities of his sons; there were four distinct marks in the carpet, indentations where the chair that took their combined weight had been dragged. A detail noticed, with affectionate forensic eye, in the bedroom of the house in which Ronald Walter Kötting died in 2000.

Father's heart was bad, he spent time in hospital, visited by his family - and then, with no hope of recovery, he came home to wait. Andrew Kötting undertook a sequence of black and white photographs of the body (death-bearded, eyes shut); propped up on pillows, in the coffin. He sent one of these staged, full-length shots to sixty-five people (the years of his father's life). It formed part of the frame-strip précis of a complex biography: schoolboy, young father (babe in arms), grinning voyager, corpse. Sixty-five friends, acquaintances, elective associates of Kötting were invited to respond, to shape a portrait of this unknown (or too well-known) man. A book, *In the Wake of a Deadad*, would emerge. Even silence - Paul Auster, Dinos Chapman, Richard Wentworth - will be published. 'No reply' becomes part of the texture, along with the hesitations, prevarications, confessions. Many of the respondees turn

Kötting's challenge back on themselves: their refusal to look into the eyes of a lifeless parent, the awareness that there is nothing left between bereaved writer and the end of things. We are the dead in remission, treading water, making our sorry pleas.

The book, published to coincide with the Canterbury exhibition, teases out Ronald Walter's story, inch by inch. Deadad has his own deadad. There are echoes of Paul Celan: 'Death is a master from Germany and his eyes are blue.' German grandfather Kötting, naturalised, does his bit in the military, out in the Faroes, watching the sea. He starts a second family, unknown to his first, but recorded in Danish documentation. It is necessary, the film-maker decides, to grant miscreant grandfather Kötting his own inflatable. He is not grinning like his son, but grave and self-contained in Reginald Maudling spectacles. The hot breath of the dead ones keep the giant inflatables erect, wavering in sub-Arctic winds, erupting out of cars, hissing to life in the neat gardens of suburban villas. Children, Andrew Kötting's nieces and nephews, are held up, rope-supported, to kiss the painted faces: in a performance that recalls the original trespass, the stretching into father's private wardrobe.

Onto those deadad memorial photographs - a Styx passport - the fiction of Ronald Walter Kötting is grafted. Facts are concealed within the pages of a fat book. This man was born in Highgate in 1935 and educated in a grammar school 'just off the Sidcup Bypass'. After an apprenticeship in a textile factory at Wuppertal in Germany, Roland returned to England, to his father's business, selling belts and braces in Regent Street. Married, he relocated to Sidcup. Four sons, one daughter. A 'mock Georgian' house in Elmstead Woods: first heart attack. Beckenham: further attacks, diabetes, death. The four photographs, those intrusions, are just part of what has been left behind to replace the heat and noise of a missing man. With no further information, Andrew Kötting's collaborators are invited to flick the still images into a kind of

primitive animation.

The most affecting contribution to the deadad dossier comes from Andrew's younger brother, Mark. Shards of unsecured evidence are transformed into a play, a confessional diary in which the teller is fully implicated. You begin to see what Andrew is exorcising, circling around, in the furious pilgrimage of a film that took him from the south-east London suburbs to the coast, Germany, the Pyrenees, the Faroes, Mexico and Hollywood. Mark, a 'black cab driver', is writing a version of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*: home as hell, siblings, uncle, violent father making impotent noises. The Köttings even have a young brother called Joey, who has taken himself off to California. 'Joey, Joey, come here son.' Mark's reportage is as sharp as Pinter. 'Are you a believer?' he asks the dying man. 'I gave you a Christian name,' dad replies. 'He smoked Peter Stuyvesant,' Mark recalls. 'His first son's called Peter after his favourite fag.' Memory solicits memory. Fill in your own pauses. 'Wear some new shoes, boys.' As a youth, doing a paper round, Mark kept out of the way until his father had stormed off, bowler-hatted, to the station. Sneaking to the deepfreeze to hoist an illicit chocky icecream, he found his mother. 'Mum was there. She'd been stuffed in... Daddy was odd. I knew that, all of us knew that.'

There was white spittle on the lips of that photographed Bedlam grin. Ronald Kötting's language was loud and angry: old English in a German mouth. The abused mother kept her head down. Andrew aspired to be working-class. Joey learnt to surf. Mark shat on the living-room carpet. But at the end of it all, father losing strength, dignity, he is lovingly nursed by his bruised children, his sons: washed, shaved, wrestled to stool. There is a prime Kötting moment when Joey and Mark get into the shower with their not-quite-deadad, supporting him, soaping him, letting him sit there, life-force gone, bowels loose, wondering where time had leaked away, why he never took up the saxophone.

The short memoir by Mark, the literate cabbie, reminds me of the

Hackney voices of the Pinter house in *The Homecoming*. ‘Oh, Daddy, you’re not going to use your stick on me are you? Eh? Don’t use your stick on me, Daddy. No, please. It wasn’t my fault, it was one of the others. I haven’t done anything wrong, dad, honest. Don’t clout me with that stick, Dad.’ Through ceremonies of art and performance, domestic crimes are forgiven, but not forgotten. The Kötting boys, strategists all, provide their own solutions. Where Pinter’s Max is affronted - ‘A corpse? A corpse on my floor? Get him out of here! Clear him out of here! - Andrew reaches for his camera. He holds it out, at arm’s-length, as he did beside Burton’s pyramid, to make a double portrait of two lightly-bearded men; one living, one gone. The mirror of flesh. And in that moment he remembers, years before, the time when they walked together from Taunton to Lyme Regis, without conversation. Now the dead father, in his printed skin, his rubbery pelt, must travel again: as an inflatable avatar he will complete the ascent of Montségur that hobbled him in life. Although he never understood why Andrew didn’t try for Hollywood, his fairground effigy is posed by his film-maker son on immaculate Californian grass, below that famously tacky hillside sign.

Interviewed by Judith Palmer (for the collection, *Private Views: Artists Working Today*), Andrew Kötting spoke of the difficulty of exposing private histories to the public gaze:

When *Gallivant* opened, my dad came to the premiere. At the end, I saw he’d been crying, and in that moment I knew I’d affected him in a way I hadn’t before. I think that he’d understood for the first time what it was that I’d been doing for all those years. He died in December, but I think after *Gallivant* he took me a bit more seriously, and understood what nonsense was possibly about. He could see on the big screen the trees I’d been barking up.

The Canterbury College for the Creative Arts is a building site, conveniently aligned with a ring road that carries you around the town’s sanctioned ruins. But despite the warning notice fixed to the door - ‘Some of the images in this exhibition are of an extreme sexual/pornographic nature which could cause offense’ - there are no

punters in the gallery. Where else, I wondered, could you pack a generous space with weird pornography and not attract a single student, a single outraged ratepayer? Deadad's covert smut-cache has been converted into public display: Kötting's mug in every frame. He admitted that his head had been skillfully transposed into these hot-pillow playlets by his wife, seamlessly computer-stitched. There were further tricks and illusions, psychedelic-sick wallpaper with kabbalistic signs; eyes that winked, pricks that twitched and waved. Eros and Thanatos in gummy embrace. The porn sets were a Sixties-revival furniture catalogue with optional human extras, playing at Manson families. A group of Japanese dignitaries, potential investors, taken on a tour of the college, clustered around this 'digital decoupage' in polite astonishment.

And there was a questionnaire to complete. 'Have you travelled from outside of Canterbury to visit the gallery?' 'Are you Male/Female?' 'Did you find the written material accompanying the exhibition useful?' Yes, indeed. The film too: a bench on which to park yourself for an hour's viewing, a world tour with the deadad inflatable. On Regent Street, Kötting cries out: 'Tell me when he comes alive. Tell me when he rises from the dead.' When he plays about on the balcony of his former London flat, the local kids enter into the spirit of the thing. 'Jump,' they shout. 'Jump jump jump.' Everything draws inexorably towards Mexico and the Day of the Dead: Eden in skeleton costume, Kötting laying himself out in a cemetery, surrounded by candles and marigolds, on top of his now deflated father. Eden has taken to calling her grandfather 'The Big Man'. Thereby chiming with another wake: 'Bygmester Finnegan, of the Stuttering Hand.' There's nothing left for Andrew, returned to England, the coast, but to crawl inside the skin of his zeppelin father, to witness a shrouded world of postmortem light. 'Of being inside his very being.' A nicotine-flavoured oxygen tent.

In his youth, escaping from home, parents and the seductions of art and

bohemianism, Andrew Kötting became a lumberjack and read Beckett. He must have known the poem, 'Malacoda', in which Beckett describes the measuring up of his dead father: 'thrice he came/ the undertaker's man/ impassible behind his scutal bowler.' The trajectory of that poem moves out from a leafy Dublin suburb towards a grey sea: 'all aboard all souls.' The curvature of Hastings bay - a bed of pebbles, a necklace of fuzzy lights - is also part of Kötting's memory film. 'The beach to which I lost my virginity.' Place, you remark, not person. She's gone, an older language student. The beach is immortal in its melancholy. Deflated dad has been removed to an art gallery, exhibited like a murdered tiger. Time to find some new challenge, sharper pain. In September 2006 the Kötting brothers will take on the English Channel, swim to France. Seasickness, projectile vomiting, jelly fish. Perfect! Andrew cruises the internet searching for an accompanying boat. The first one he finds is immediately booked, game on. Its name is *Gallivant*.

---Iain Sinclair

Judith Palmer (edts): *Private Views: Artists Working Today*. Serpent's Tail, 2004.