

Andrew Mottershead and Rebecca French. Friday Social Evening: Private Members' Club. In collaboration with the West Indian Ex-Services Association, Clapham, London. 27 Apr '01

Reviewed by Joshua Sofaer

Well it was like this. You turned up at the West Indian Ex-Services Association in Clapham, became a one-night-only-member and lounged around a space reminiscent of a school common-room complete with the bad institutional lighting, sipping a drink alongside other guests, around thirty so called 'micro-performers', members of the West Indian Ex-Services Association, their friends and family, and a large portrait of The Queen.

And that was about it. Nothing much happened. Except that every so often you would find yourself being micro-performed to by one of the disproportionately large 'cast'. There was a genuine decadence to this, like the Lanesborough Hotel, where they have a one to one staff to guest ratio.

Someone would come over to you and strike up a conversation. It might be that they recognised you from somewhere, had to tell you how fantastic their father was, describe in intricate detail how passionate they were about fresco painting, ask for advice on how to make a quick buck (my suggestion was prostitution), or simply just eye you up for a little too long.

With the current media saturation of fly-on-the-walls, docu-soaps, journo-biography and the consistent blurring of fact and fiction as fact and fiction, Roland Barthes' 1979 observation that "sincerity is merely a second-degree image-repertoire"<sup>†</sup> has become the cultural axiom of the moment.

Friday Social Evening was a live

action version that put you in the thick of this faction quagmire and forced you to be partisan and participant. There was a continual oscillation between belief and suspicion, between enjoyment in your disbelief and irritation at your inability to accept something as either genuine or a lie.

Of course drunken micro-performances became macro-performances and were outed by their extroversion – but this collapse of subterfuge was balanced by the way in which as a guest you started to perform back. When a micro performer who called herself Hannah came over and went on for an age about how much I looked like the mate I had come with and were we brothers? we spun her the yarn that we were cousins. The slip of belief in her performance was the inception of our own. Similarly it was certainly the case that in a casual conversation between two guests, veracity was often in question. I noted with some empathy on the way out that someone had written in the comments book "no-one believed me, I really do run a karaoke".

But what about the West Indian ex-servicemen? For most of the evening there was a clear geographic split between the (on the whole) young white things of the London art crowd and the (on the whole) middle-aged and elderly black men whose space had been temporarily invaded.

I did have a chat with one of the members of the West Indian Ex-Services Association (who incidentally was not an ex-serviceman himself – or so he led me to believe). We were talking about where we both lived, and when I said that I lived between Waterloo and Kennington he replied, "Oh that's only just round the corner, I thought

you must have come from Kensington or Chelsea, or somewhere like that". Was he reacting to RP strains of my voice? Was I dressed in a particularly Kings Road style? Or was I being micro-performed to?

<sup>†</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Deliberation in The Rustle of Language*, 1989 p360, originally published in *Tel Quel*, 1979