

---

# RED HOOK JOURNAL

## Tactical Smarts

Martin Herbert

### On Steve McQueen's *Queen and Country* (2007)

On a warm spring day in 2007, I met Steve McQueen in a small café in Soho, London, to discuss *Queen and Country*, which had recently made its presence felt in two places: in the Great Hall of Manchester's Central Library—where McQueen's samizdat stamps, featuring portraits of soldiers felled in the Iraq war, were being displayed in an oak cabinet containing 120 vertical glassed drawers—and in Parliament, where a Labour MP had called for a debate on whether the stamps should be produced by the Royal Mail.

When I spoke to McQueen that day (an encounter I later wrote up for *Artforum*), he was voluble and confident. "It's obvious they've been put in a situation," he said of the then-Labour government, "because how could you say no? Why would you say no?"

They said no. Politicians are well aware that the news cycle will almost always move on if you equivocate and/or put up distractions for long enough, and the proposal was stonewalled—despite a petition organized by the Art Fund, the UK's fund-raising charity for art; despite *Queen and Country* continuing to tour; despite the number of stamps ticking unhappily upward. At the end of my article, I wrote: "If, against the artist's fervid belief, the project is never manifested in the mail, is either shut down or spun out of existence, then that is perhaps a dangerous omen—a bleak measure of art's agency."

"The Queen and Country petition is now closed,' says the Art Fund's website.

What McQueen did next is well known. During our conversation, he mentioned in passing that he was working on a film about Bobby Sands, the IRA hunger striker. That film became the award-winning *Hunger* (2008). McQueen is now prepping his third film, which costars Brad Pitt. *Queen and Country* feels, in some ways, like a long time ago.

Yet was it a failure? At a recent talks program at the daadgalerie in Berlin—organized by the Agency of Unrealized Projects—curator Ana Teixeira Pinto spoke against the unexamined romanticism of the "unrealised," existing as it does in a perpetual future-conditional tense. And one might hold this against *Queen and Country* as it languishes in its incomplete state.

But perform the thought experiment that it *did* come to pass. The stamps are made, the public receives a memento mori with every letter they get, and the project through its very ubiquity perhaps fades into ambient invisibility, touching us about as violently as does war imagery on the evening news: a giant step for art that leaves a quickly fading footprint in the real world.

This is a cold reading, to be sure, but a not completely implausible one. The artwork's inert status, though, allows us to privilege an inverted scenario that reflects *Queen and Country*'s resonant ontological status: something that has an effect *because* it doesn't quite exist, that—touching on Pinto's

---

category of the dreamily unrealised but also exceeding it, because it reflects authoritarian conditions in its nonexistence—illuminates the lockdown power and flip-side nervousness of the state with regard to even a widely approved gesture of dissent and/or lamentation at foreign policy. So long as *Queen and Country* doesn't function, we can always envision how it *might* have done, how much immeasurable mental change it might have effected over breakfast tables nationwide. This kind of potentiality, in politics, is what allows a constituency to put their faith in an opposition party that, for as long as it remains so, has no chance to shape the nation. Applied to art, it reflects a view that things could be different, if only; the longer the party stays out of power, speaking idealistically, or the artwork fails to come to pass, the more cherished it might be. It falls precisely between Pyrrhic victory and actual success.

When I spoke to McQueen, his happiness with *Queen and Country*, despite its already being shanghaied, lay, it seemed to me, in its obvious tactical smarts: the piece would operate on numerous levels, and its proposed existence put the administration in a tight spot—saying no would be heartless and a betrayal of those who'd served.

What I didn't see at the time was that it might succeed even as something like a rumor, speak even when barely embodied; but one wonders whether McQueen, who is extremely good at playing by his own rules, whatever game he joins, saw this possibility too, right at the outset. That if this were a chess tournament, it was one in which a player could see his king—or, really, his queen—hemmed in from all sides, and yet not be declared the loser.

*Two more texts on Steve McQueen's Queen and Country (2007): 911 Words On Steve McQueen's Queen and Country by Michael Baers and The Loves and Lives of Stamp Soldiers by Sarah Rifky (forthcoming).*

**Martin Herbert is a writer and critic based in Tunbridge Wells, UK.**

Posted December 3, 2012. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

<http://www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/tactical-smarts/>

**CCS BARD**