

IAN BREAKWELL

Recorded Live



The artist and writer Ian Breakwell "In conversation" with the cartoonists Chris Garratt and Mick Kidd (creators of BIFF). Recorded live at the ICA, London 26 June 1986 on the occasion of the paperback publication by Pluto Press of IAN BREAKWELL'S DIARY: 1964 - 1985.

15 March 1973 Bermondsey Street, behind London Bridge Station.

A clear, sunny afternoon. Men are unloading packing cases by means of a crane from the second floor of a warehouse. A young man with shoulder-length styled hair, flared trousers and built-up shoes, walks out of the alley alongside the warehouse, carrying in his hands a live pigeon. He holds up the pigeon to show the men in the loading bay, and says: "I'm going to fuck it."

6 February 1975 Bristol-London train, near Bath, Somerset.

By the side of the railway track is a white house which has a new antique door with an inset leaded window and polished coach lamps on either side. The husband is cleaning the car on the gravel drive leading from the five-barred gate. The wife is polishing the handle of the wishing well. A bull is looking at them over the garden wall and sticking out its big red tongue.

25 March 1975 London: Farringdon Road, EC1.

A man with one leg considerably shorter than the other, lurching along whistling "I Could Have Danced All Night".

19 September 1975 London: a public lavatory, Theobalds Road.

In the lavatory bowl: a used piece of sandpaper.

28 November 1975 London: The Strand, 11.45 pm.

A man cursing his reflection in a shop window.

15 May 1978 London: Farringdon Street, EC1, 10.10 am.

A meat porter is loading lumps of raw meat into the back of a taxi, under the watchful eyes of three nuns. The backseat of the taxi is filled up with legs of lamb, shoulders of pork, and beefsteaks. The nuns squeeze in amongst the meat and the taxi drives off.

13 January 1984 1.35 train from London to Audley End.

Four pinstriped stockbrokers playing cards and kicking each other under the table.

5 October 1984 Matlock Bath, Derbyshire.

The cliffs towering above the gorge were floodlit and fairy lights lit up the banks of the River Derwent on which drifted a pageant of illuminated floats in the shape of peacocks, gondolas and railway engines.

By 1 am. the lights were turned off for the night and the admiring crowds had all gone home. A full moon shone over the gorge. All was quiet except for the distant chanting of "Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!" from the wooded valley far below.

IAN BREAKWELL: Many of the little incidents in the Diary are described without explanation; there are probably logical explanations for a lot of them, but not at the moment when they are witnessed. But some of the incidents drag on, so that the background to them gradually emerges; this removes the 'instant mystery' but reveals a hidden story underneath.

12 January 1976 London.

I went into my local pub in Smithfield Market just before 10 pm. There was the usual night crowd, lorry drivers from Scotland and Ireland delivering to the meat market, and night workers from the nearby newspaper distribution depots. I took a seat at the bar, next to Ethel, who runs a boarding house for lorry drivers.

After a while I became aware of a girl, possibly in her early twenties, rushing agitatedly from one group of drinkers to another. She was thin, wild-eyed, her hair cropped short, her movements jerky and unco-ordinated. She wore black slacks, blouse, and a blue nylon overall. Her face was raw and strained, no make-up. The palms of her hands were ingrained with dirt. She blurted out semi-incoherent words in a loud rough voice. She was very disturbed.

I ordered another drink, and when I turned round again the girl had gone and so had the fat lorry driver at the corner table who had been buying her drinks. Obviously he thought he was onto a good thing.

"Where's that driver taken that girl, Ethel?"

"To his lorry. He's not fussy."

A few minutes later the girl rushes back in; the driver comes back in the other door, shaking his head.

"She's mental, that one."

"Call the cops, Joe."

"I don't want any trouble."

"She came out of the blue."

"She's run away from a home."

"She's putting me off my beer, get her out."

I begin to talk to her, persuade her to sit down and carry on talking. She begins to talk back.

"Audrey Wilkinson."

"From a hostel. I ran away from a hostel."

"Had a row with me mam this morning. I was in this boy's flat. She don't care. I am not going back to the hostel I'll tell you that. They treat you like muck."

"They give me tablets but I don't take them."

"I had a job before, scrubbing stairs."

"Me sister Janet, she's in Plumstead but she's in court on Monday, she keeps breaking windows."

"Our Janet's had treatment. They've give her treatment, electric."

"You won't call the police, I've had enough of them, I'm terrified of them, you won't call them."

"I tell you what, I'd rather go home with you."

"Him there, he's had too much to drink. He wanted to take me in his lorry where I didn't want to go."

"I've got no coat, I'm freezing."

Now it's closing time and I walk with her to the end of the bar to collect Ethel, who two drinks ago had said she'd come with us to St Barts Hospital round the corner, after Audrey had agreed to go.

*Gauchaikall Street. Glasgow.
10.40 a.m.*

25 FEB 1978



"Right then Ethel, are you ready?"

"No Ian, I'm not coming. I've been told to keep my nose out of things. I'm not coming, no, I don't want to get involved."

Audrey visibly stiffens. Luckily, Fred, a local caretaker is just leaving the bar and agrees to walk round to the hospital with Audrey and I, which we do. I explain the situation to the friendly night receptionist and a nurse takes Audrey's arm and leads her behind a screen, and that's the last I see of her. I go home.

On Wednesday I telephone the hospital. The receptionist tells me that Audrey was admitted to the observation ward, but discharged herself during the night. They had no idea where she was now.

MICK KIDD: Reading your Diary triggers off many memories of incidents I have observed myself in the past. When you write your Diary do you sift through a whole set of recorded observations and choose one, or do you record them all? There seem to be recurring elements of humour, pathos and strangeness in each of them.

IAN BREAKWELL: But this book contains a wide variety of Diary extracts, including those which only work when read on the printed page: those, for instance in which very little happens, so that the reader thinks at first that there is nothing there, but on re-reading begins to feel that there is in fact something there, but what exactly? Whereas when reading extracts aloud to an audience, as I am now, then one tends to choose those with punchlines, or with a beginning, middle and end, for immediate effect. So that can give a one-sided impression of what the book contains.

And then, the Diary entry is pedantically located, timed or dated, they are all documentary, yet there is a form of fiction by default in that there may be twenty things going on around me but it is only two that I notice, or I choose to record two and leave out the other eighteen.

MICK KIDD: Do you record at the time or write them later?

IAN BREAKWELL: Later, from memory. I don't carry a notebook around with me, but I will make a mental or shirtcuff note at the time, of trigger images, say "bus + typist", and that is sufficient for me to recall the scene later.

MICK KIDD: Yet they contain so much precise detail.

IAN BREAKWELL: Well, they are edited down to try to achieve the minimum number of words to tell the story, although some deliberately fade away or end inconclusively leaving the reader to wonder what happened next. A lot is left unsaid; as Nick Kimberley pointed out in his Introduction to the book, suppressed violence threatens to erupt on almost every page and yet there is very little explicit violence. I detest the continuous diet of repetitive violence on television, especially the cop shows. The violence in the Diary is implied, seething under the surface.

MICK KIDD: Like you I'm fascinated by snippets, by coming in halfway through something.

IAN BREAKWELL: Me too. Yesterday I was on an aeroplane and just before landing my ears became blocked with air pressure, until you only hear bits of what people are saying, eventually you lip-read, probably inaccurately. Misinterpretation intrigues me; a lot of the Diary is a mixture of sharp observation combined with the half-seen, glimpsed, half-heard. Often the rational explanation will be straightforward, and dull.

CHRIS GARRATT: One of the devices you use is to deliberately remove the rational explanation; for instance, not to indicate which of two described visual images is 'real' and which one an image on an adjoining advertising billboard.

IAN BREAKWELL: That's an example of collaging images together instead of isolating them. A public bar is a good example of layers of visual images which juxtapose and overlap. Faces in the middle distance with other faces coming out of the sides of them, and in the background faces seen against faces on calendars or posters, and the whole scene duplicated and reversed in the mirrors behind the bar. If you took a snapshot you would see all of that. Or it could be painted, in the way that Magritte painted overlapping contours to form a mosaic of surprising juxtapositions.

Or, les contours visible des objets, dans la réalité, se touchent comme s'ils formaient une mosaïque:
(Now, the visible outlines of objects in reality touch as if forming a mosaic:) LES MOTS ET LES IMAGES
(WORDS AND IMAGES) Illustration in LA REVOLUTION SURREALISTE (Paris) vol.5 no.12 (15 December, 1929).



James Joyce and Phillipe Soupault going over the French translation of ANNA LIVIA PLURABELLE. Note the ruined condition of Joyce's left eye after repeated iridectomy. Associated Press Paris 1934.

21 August 1984 London: St John Street, EC1, 8.10 pm.

A big hand holding a silver spoon is smashing an egg in an eggcup shaped like a little man's body with outstretched arms. Three identical sweat-soaked men in leather overalls and caps are wielding hammers in unison, their glistening chests and arms lit by the fire of the forge. In front of them, a young man and woman in white tee-shirts, he with a blackened right eye, she with a blackened left eye, are walking along the pavement with their flaxen-haired daughter skipping ahead of them.

CHRIS GARRATT: I notice you say 'snapshot', not photograph; the scenes described in the diary are like Instamatic fixed-focus snapshots, as opposed to art photographs with sharp foreground for the important subject against a blurred background.

IAN BREAKWELL: I've always had very good eyesight, with wide peripheral vision, so the 'sideways glance' of the Diary, which has been interpreted as a literary device, is to some extent a physical characteristic. I think an interesting book could be written on how artists and writers' physical attributes or deficiencies affected their work, and how much of it which has been interpreted symbolically by critics could in fact be the result of physical things. James Joyce's impaired eyesight must have had an effect on how he saw and interpreted the world.

CHRIS GARRATT: And Monet's cataracts.

IAN BREAKWELL: A doctor told me that Swift suffered from a disease which caused vertigo and confusion of scale, of what is tall and what is small, which casts an interesting light on Gullivers Travels if it's true. Physical impairment can cause interesting results.

8 February 1976 London: St Bartholomew's Hospital, Paget Ward (for female road traffic accidents). Early Sunday morning.

1st elderly patient: Are you having Communion?

2nd elderly patient: No, I'm having a boiled egg.



02 OCT 1979

St John Street
London EC1

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CHRIS GARRATT: Your book differs from most Diaries in that it is rarely written in the first person. And yet from the carefully constructed and objective language which you use I get clear impressions of the person who is writing; of someone who feels disdain, disgust, sometimes compassion, but overall an overwhelmingly misanthropic vision.

IAN BREAKWELL: Well, to begin with I was not interested in writing a 'what I did today' diary in the manner of Samuel Pepys. I did not think that my breakfast could be of interest to anybody. I now realise that was a form of reverse snobbism on my part. And although I cut out the first-person narrative, nevertheless it was possible for the reader to deduce a mirror image of the supposedly anonymous diarist by virtue of the kind of things which persistently caught the writer's attention. But then I decided that this self-effacement was coy and puritanical if adopted exclusively. Also, as I live on the top floor of a building in central London, many of the Diary entries record that lofty viewpoint. But I thought that the impression could be given of someone in an ivory tower looking down, so that everyone was under the microscope except the diarist. Therefore, in the new book I introduced a lot of the first-person autobiographical sections which had been written over the years but excluded from earlier small-press editions.

MICK KIDD: The obvious question: do you write day by day?

IAN BREAKWELL: No. There were four years of 365 day Diaries, but they were mixtures of writing, drawing, collage and photographs. In order that the new book could be cheap there are no visuals, it's entirely written excerpts, which tend to be chronologically irregular. Keeping a diary day by day can become obsessive until you do little else, so I let it drift back to being spasmodic. And what catches my attention, and when, is quite arbitrary; I can't explain it.

CHRIS GARRATT: Do you see your Diary as separate from your work as a painter and video-maker, or do these activities cross over?

IAN BREAKWELL: They cross over all the time. In my pictures I try to say things which can't be said in words. In fact there are many things which I find impossible either to paint, draw, film or write; things dependent on the senses other than sight and hearing. I don't do landscape paintings; the combination of sun, wind, rain, the smell of the flowers and the earth produce a sensory impression too overpowering and diffuse for me to capture in paint or words. I greatly admire people who can capture that sensory richness of landscape. Van Gogh's paintings have an intensity equivalent to the blazing hot days on which they were painted, and Francis Kilvert was a diarist whose verbal descriptions of landscape are marvellously evocative.

CHRIS GARRATT: Are there things which cannot be said in pictures but only in words?

IAN BREAKWELL: Dialogue, obviously.

CHRIS GARRATT: One feature of what has been called "post-modernist art" has been the use of words in paintings. In the Pre-Renaissance it was common to have captions and inscriptions as part of the painting, but after that for a long time it was taboo.

IAN BREAKWELL: Well, I've often mixed words and visual images in my exhibited pictures for twenty years. But, there's no doubt that people still get confused when they see words in pictures. Part of the problem has been the false image foisted onto

the public of the artist as an illiterate, especially male artists, such as that wretched portrayal of the American Abstract Expressionists as people who couldn't put two words together, in fact that there was even something unmanly and cissy about being able to do so; the artist as strong silent type, or uncouth primitive who could hardly speak at all without a Budweiser in either hand, but gee, they sure could whack it out on canvas, actions speak louder than words. I find that an objectionable image, and also dishonest, because many of those artists were highly articulate more than the critics who wrote on their behalf, but the artists words were not allowed to be heard because they might contradict the critical interpretation. Words were the critics' domain. It was believed that the picture should speak for itself, but then there are a lot of things to be said as well in words. All the visual artists whose work I like always turn out to be verbally articulate as well, and also often are very good writers: Klee, Kubin, Burra, Ernst, and most of the Surrealists for instance, to name but a few.

CHRIS GARRATT: Can I return to the vicious qualities I find in your diary? It's full of people exposing themselves, drunk, vomiting, people in situations of desolate urban squalor. Are you drawn to such subjects, or do they have a fascination for you?

IAN BREAKWELL: I have no abiding interest in the diary as a literary form, I don't like most diaries, yet the form is familiar to most people, they've probably started to keep one themselves at some time and given up on 22 January, but at least they are not alienated by a strange literary form and are prepared to start to read it, and whether they like it or not is then up to them. Now my favourite diary is Franz Kafka's, and in the postscript Kafka's editor, Max Brod, says: "One must in general take into account the false impression that every diary unintentionally makes. When you keep a diary, you usually put down what is oppressive or irritating. By being put down on paper painful impressions are got rid of. Pleasant impressions for the most part do not have to be counteracted in this way; you make note of them, as many people should know by experience, only in exceptional cases, or when (as in the case of a travel diary) it is your express purpose to do so. Ordinarily however, diaries resemble a kind of defective barometric curve that registers only the lows, the hours of greatest depression, but not the highs."

Blissful things tend to be kept secret, and are often entirely personal and subjective. Whereas tense situations make you edgy, and when you're edgy you're wary and watchful and often see things sharply.

I love things which erupt suddenly out of dull calm.

12 May 1978 London: St John Street, EC1, 2.30 pm.

A big fat woman in a yellow dress is standing with her back against a wall poster of a naked woman kneeling at the feet of a fashionably dressed young man who looks straight ahead as she clutches his immaculately trousered right leg and gazes up at him imploringly. The big fat woman stands placidly, holding her handbag in front of her. A businessman in a charcoal-grey pinstripe suit and carrying a briefcase, walks past. The woman erupts: "AAAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHH!!! YOU KNOW-ALL! YES YOU! LITTLE JOHNNY KNOW-ALL! YOU! YES, I KNOW THE LIKES OF YOU! AAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHH!" she springs forward, her eyes popping, her fist raised to strike him. He jumps back, steps aside, adjusts his bowler hat, and hurries across the road. She returns to stand silently in her previous position, holding her handbag in front of her.

I think characters such as that woman make it all worthwhile.

But also, I think a lot of the ' nastiness ' is funny. My favourite radio comedian was always Al Read, but a lot of people in the south of England didn't like him because he "mocked the afflicted". But to do so is just part of a typical Northern humour born of a bleak, crippled environment. As my mother would say: "You have to laugh." And you can find the same humour in Glasgow, Belfast, New York, it's a black humour; but some people don't like humour which goes beyond the amusing, the blackness disturbs them. I like amusing things, but I like humour with an edge even more.

30 April 1978 London: Chapel Market, Islington, Sainsbury's supermarket, 12.15 pm.

The holiday shopping is in full swing. Among the shelves of fizzy orange drinks, the baskets of pineapple chunks, the displays of tinned potatoes, the boxes of jellies, the piles of baked beans, the pyramids of meat balls, the bins of frozen chickens, the stacks of cheese crackers, the heaps of lard, the rows of pork pies and the racks of condensed milk, a man shuffles round the supermarket. He is dressed in a stiff and greasy suit, black boots and a dirty white roll-neck sweater the same colour as his face. At the throat, blood oozes through the wool of the sweater, adding to that which is already black and congealed. From him comes the purest smell of death, a stench so nauseating that shoppers turn away, gagging, holding their hands to their noses and mouths as they stare with strained concentration at the sponge mixtures. He moves like a ghost from shelf to shelf, filling his trolley with chicken, ham, bacon, potatoes, peas, carrots, syrup puddings and double cream; it seems that he has a good appetite.

CHRIS GARRATT: Do you have any moral stance? Do you draw the line at anything you choose to write? You describe people with mental and physical disabilities without qualifying comment for instance.

IAN BREAKWELL: Sometimes I deliberately use callous reported speech to make people think. There is a recurring voice in my Diary based on a character from one of my local pubs; a man who is a walking lump, seemingly without feelings in his heart or his brain. And opinionated with it. Little cogs move slowly inside his thick head. His remorseless callousness, accurately recorded in the Diary, hopefully makes the reader think of the opposite point of view. "Fuckin' Live Aid, let the fuckers starve I say, what have they ever done for us?" Which is probably voicing what a lot of hypocrites dare not say. Whereas this man is so dense and uncaring that he has no remorse about voicing his obscene views. He crops up in the book under various guises; as The Scholar, whose little knowledge is a dangerous thing; as The Voice Of Law And Order, spouting his ignorant, but widely held opinions about the IRA; and as The Patriot, in other words a racist. The copy editor at Pluto Press, my publishers, queried whether reporting vile racism verbatim was positive or negative, and I said that in my opinion it was necessary to show racists for exactly what they are: mindless bigots, no matter how unpleasant it is to read. It forces the reader to take sides, to decide whether they care or not.

13 August 1984 London, in the pub.

The Patriot speaks:

"Now you take these Olympic Games. You see how well they've done there. And it's not surprising. It's a fact of nature that animals run faster, jump further, swim quicker than human beings. Always have done and always will. And the animals of the jungle are the fleetest of foot. A horse will outrun a man, no matter how hard he tries, but the cheetah will outrun the horse. The panther will outjump any man, the gorilla will lift weights beyond the scope of any human, and the monkey will do gold medal gymnastics all fucking day. It stands to reason. But what I want to know is, why should we have to watch it? Every time you switch on the telly what do you see? A big black woman with rubbery lips gazing up at the Union Jack with tears in her eyes while they're playing "God Save The Queen". God help the Queen I say, Christ knows what she must think of it all. And every film you watch they're there. You can't watch a film that's made in the last ten years that isn't full of them. It all started with West Side Story, that was the thin end of the wedge. You see, when Queen Victoria said that all Empire citizens were welcome here she knew very well that they'd have to fucking swim it. Well times change. She didn't anticipate the aeroplane. How was she to know? But now they can come by aeroplane, by train, by boat, they can come by bleeding submarine. Well they should let them come by boat, the biggest boats there are, a whole fleet, and when they're in the middle of the sea we should bomb the fucking lot. Argue about it afterwards I say. They should stop these experiments on animals and use niggers instead."

CHRIS GARRATT: Is this the same character who recurs in the final section of the book among the babble of hundreds of voices in the pub?

IAN BREAKWELL: No; that fatalistic, cynical character does use his tone of voice but there are also elements of me in that character in the final section of the diary.

All of the news of all of the world, what does it all add up to eh? Nothing. Yesterday's newspapers today's chipwrappers. All the books ever written: no more than a fart in the wind. All the songs ever sung: wasted breath. All the pictures ever painted: they might as well have painted their toenails. All the jokes ever told: just laughing to keep from crying. All the wars that were ever fought, what did they achieve? Bugger all. They just put people out of their misery a bit quicker that's all. The tyrants die, the heroes die, the villains die, the heroines die, every one the same. All the accidents: all the car smashes and the plane crashes, the drownings, the burnings, the suffocations, the floods, famines, earthquakes, tornadoes and eruptions of volcanoes, they were all going to die anyway sooner or later. Aren't we all? Yes, same again please, pint of mixed.

All right, an aeroplane falls out of the sky. Two hundred passengers killed. Was it a bomb they say, or instrument failure, did someone leave a door open? Maybe all four engines dropped off? Who knows? Old Charlie Fort could have thought up a hundred different reasons just as likely. But what if half way across the ocean Captain Smith just thought, "Ah, fuck it, let's go." Flips a switch. Still smiling as the plane hits the waves. No, no, it's my round, you bought the last one. No, I insist. Oh, all right then, I'll have a drop of Teacher's, no ice. I'll get the next one in.

Agreed, agreed, but let me just sketch out a little scenario for you, OK? Let's imagine your typical early morning train, there's a whole carriage full of people all worried about something or other. The old man in the corner is worried about his pension. The woman opposite him is worried because the train's late and she might miss her connection. The man across the aisle on his way to a business conference, he's frowning and chain-smoking, he's trying to write his speech. Grandma's worried about her son Tony and his wife and the new baby, Margaret's ever so tired and weepy since the birth and little Tracey's sickening for sure. Are you with me so far? Right. Now Margaret, she sits opposite, washed out, worried, and she's got Tracey grizzling on her knee. OK? While Tony, sitting alongside her, he's worrying about Margaret and Tracey and his mother, she's not as young as she was; if only he could get a job, earn some decent money and get them a house and a bungalow nearby for mum maybe. And the man in the window seat he's just moved into a new flat and discovered that the previous tenant was homosexual and now he's worried sick that he might have caught AIDS by cleaning out the toilet with a cut on his hand, that's right, incubating inside him right now maybe, it'll be months or even years before he knows for sure and then it'll be too late, there's a lot of worry ahead. Meanwhile, ten miles up the bleedin' track a bunch of spotty-faced kids are busy hanging an iron girder on a rope from the railway bridge, while one of them keeps a lookout in the road, hopping from foot to foot, a bag of nerves, worried they'll get caught see? Just a half for me thanks. And three minutes later the train hits the girder, wallop! Takes the top of the cab off and the driver's head with it. All the carriages get derailed and smashup like concertinas, bodies everywhere, absolute mayhem. Here, have one of mine. And all of them worrying right up to the last minute. Fat lot of good it did them, eh? Dear oh dear they never knew what hit them. Grandma killed, Margaret killed, Tracey killed outright. Tony lives on for another thirty years in a wheelchair, the businessman gets blinded, and the bloke who thinks he's got AIDS gets saved with a blood transfusion so he's still fuckin' worried! Cheers. And the kids who did the clever little trick with the girder, they all scarper; one dies the next month on his motorbike, two get nicked and rot away in clink, and the fourth one gets clean away, joins the merchant navy and sails the seas for years, then he retires and buys a little bungalow by the seaside and potters about the garden for a few months then drops down dead with a heart attack while he's planting his lettuce, so he just went later that's all. You get my meaning? Oh my God, look who just walked in, here come's trouble! Ronnie, you scoundrel, where've you been hiding out, it must be over a year, what do you want to drink you old tow-rag?

Ian Breakwell