

## Ravelling the Mystery     Helen Sloan

Hamann's website **NothingButTheTruth.org.uk** uses investigation into hypermedia and narrative as its basis, and the series of events described in the work lend themselves well to this approach. Taking place in Italy over a period of about 20 years, there are numerous and conflicting accounts of what happened from 1969 to the early 1990s forming quite literally a 'web of intrigue'. The scenes could have been lifted straight from films like **Z** or **Alphaville** and all the individuals involved, as well as those on the periphery, brings their own interpretation and perception of the truth. It seems that no-one is sure of exactly what took place. The more information that is uncovered, the more complex the mystery. Hamann adeptly uses the fabric and limitations of the internet, with its disposition towards non-linearity, to create a piece rich in content and yet close to the pure form of the medium. In terms of content, what really seems to make **Nothing But the Truth** distinct is its exposé of contemporary politics under a backdrop of 70s design, typefaces, film, and conspiracy theory. Combining the structuralist and post-structuralist devices of the 1970s -- (1) with its contemporary legacy of the non-linear, Hamann provides a website in 2002 with a range of opportunities to investigate the changing political landscape in global superpowers of conspiracy, intrigue, swings from left to right, and vice versa.

To set the backdrop, the particular incidents and events that Hamann has appropriated began in Milan in December 1969 when a bomb exploded at the Agricultural Bank. A number of anarchists were interrogated including Giuseppe Pinnelli who was later found dead having fallen from a third floor window. Left-wing anarchists accused the chief of police at that time, Calabresi, who was subsequently assassinated apparently by the left. A number of extraordinary events ensued over the years culminating in 1988 in the arrest of three ex-left wing campaigners (all of whom had become high profile in the media of the left and right) for the death of Calabresi. The three, Sofri, Petrostefani and Bompresi, were later imprisoned in a case that had a great many inconsistencies and was likened to a 15th Century witch trial. Dario Fo based his **Accidental Death of an Anarchist**, 1987 on these incidents and used the money he won for his Nobel Prize to help free the prisoners who were clearly wrongly convicted. The case still remains unsolved but the events trace very carefully a tissue of lies and corruption intended to discredit and reinvent much of Italian politics, modern history and its judiciary system. Most importantly, it is felt that campaigners and government officers have used this case in order to rewrite events in Italy in 1968. (2)

In a contemporary context it is pretty much a given that, in the current climate, political awareness and 'having a conscience' are synonymous with lacking in humour and a sense of style. Layers of irony are placed over contexts once seen as beyond appropriation for style or humour. For instance, poverty and homelessness have been portrayed as interior design or fashion statements in the style press (3). Meanwhile, a good majority of people living in the West accept that governments routinely exaggerate, creatively manipulate, or cover up the facts. In the UK, spin-doctoring has been well documented and questioned within the press which in itself has a reputation for reinvention of the truth. Currently politics is someone else's responsibility, irrelevant and certainly not a style statement. The activities at government level thirty years ago may have parallels with today, but the packaging has changed and with it public consciousness. Youth culture saw politics as central to its activities with much of the music and fashion of the time demanding that people have an input.

Of course many people in the 70s wore their 'Nuclear Power, No' t-shirts without under-

standing the arguments, but those kinds of statements at least allowed the debates to take place and for there to be a sense of public ownership. Hamann's piece allows the viewer to contemplate these paradigm shifts while allowing him/her to experience the universal frustration of being unable to have any influence on events.

**Nothing But the Truth** maps out the incidents in Italy through images from the press, images constructed by the artist, text by the writer Nicholas Ridout, and sound fragments inspired by journalism and web texts. The historical component is there but the piece also examines the nature of storytelling and memory. Hamann keeps the sound-bites and images subtle so that the visitor to the site can bring their own response and perception in both contemporary and historical contexts. By incorporating the characteristic speed of the bandwidth and 'point and click' constraints of the internet, Hamann allows viewers to immerse themselves in the content and form of the piece without being conscious of interfacing with the computer.

For Hamann, the importance of language and its manipulation is central to the work. The texts and images essentially represent factual responses (press images, statistics and news reports) and emotional responses (documented and fictionalised accounts, and images of relatives or eyewitnesses). Dependent on how the visitor to the site navigates their way through, they will experience either the factual or the emotional. The permutations and combinations of all these routes will ensure that the visitor experiences a different sequence of fragments each time. **Nothing But the Truth** reinforces obfuscation and reinvention in history and politics, and underscores the power of the subjective in relating accounts of events. An incident which seems so far removed from contemporary society becomes curiously central to the current political climate.

At the time of writing, it is 5 /7/02. [www.NothingButTheTruth.org.uk](http://www.NothingButTheTruth.org.uk) goes live on 17/702. The exact events in 1970s still remain unresolved and are an ongoing subject for debate.

Notes:

- (1) Hamann acknowledges her debt to Barthes in the making of this piece.
- (2) Accounts of these events taken from Sofri, Bompreschi and Pietrostefani – The Story, John Foot and Accidental Death of an Anarchist Comes Back to Strike Italy, Andrew Gumbel in [www.sofri.org/foot.html](http://www.sofri.org/foot.html), [www.sofri.org/independent.html](http://www.sofri.org/independent.html)
- (3) Poverty Chic, Zoe Williams, The Guardian, 29/6/02. Williams uses the portrayal of poverty in style magazines to suggest that we have diluted and even vilified 'strong belief' by covering it up with multiple layers of irony and appropriating for fashion shoots aimed at consumers.
- (4) The following people worked with the artist to make Nothing But the Truth: Nicholas Ridout – Text, Philip Carr – Programmer, Tim Hopkins – Voices, Photographic Model, André Schmidt – Sound, additional Sound Recording – Chris Rasmussen, Rose Mazloun – Voices, Anne-Marie Woods – Photographic Model