



Making news . . . Conrad Atkinson, artist-in-residence at Edinburgh University

Raising politics to a fine art

By DONALD MacLEOD

HOLD the front page: "Kinnock and Raphael in Bust-up over Meaning of Beauty." Why not? "Robert Burns Calls for Tougher Sanctions against South Africa." What's so funny about that? "Devolution — Rifkind and Kafka — the Great Debate."

Start to think about it for a moment and you are succumbing to the sort of cultural guerrilla offensive Conrad Atkinson is engaged in.

In a sense he is making the same joke as Hugh MacDiarmid made in 1935 when he wrote:

"The newsboys came running along, 'Special! Turkish Poet's Abstruse New Song.

Scottish Authors' Opinions — and, holy snakes,

I saw the edition sell like hot cakes!"

He is also making a serious point: that art, or culture or whatever you call it, is of central importance to our lives and not just something to be tacked on after certain basic needs have been satisfied.

A consciously political artist, Atkinson points to what he feels were the enlightened policies of the Greater London Council, where he was a visual arts adviser, as showing how culture could "infect" political debate. Faced with a myriad calls on its resources for housing, old peoples' needs, social work and so on, was it right for a local authority to spend money on cultural matters? Atkinson's view is unequivocal: "You can't say 'Wait until we have all these things and then you can have a bit of art'".

Currently in Scotland as Edinburgh University's artist-in-residence, Conrad Atkinson has employed himself not only in subverting *The Scotsman's* presen-

tation of the news but also in discussing a "Percentage for Art" scheme with Edinburgh District Council under which all buildings in the city would have one per cent of their cost earmarked for "art".

Such a scheme would, he believes, make buildings more individual. It has already been adopted in parts of the USA, the Irish Republic and the Netherlands.

However likeable to meet, he seems almost tailor-made to worry and annoy a UK audience. On the one hand he is left-wing and "political" and uses a lot of words in his pictures (and a lot of words to justify them, if challenged) and on the other hand he is a commercial hit in New York, selling himself successfully in Das Kapital of the capitalist universe.

Over the last 15 years, Atkinson's work has dealt with the issues of asbestos and health, civil rights in Northern Ireland, and food and the Third World. Seeing no reason at all why he should not use words to say what he wants to say, his latest work has been to re-jig the front pages of the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* with his personal blend of art and politics.

In May and June, hoardings in Edinburgh will be displaying some of these works. "Reagan at odds with divine spirit, alleges William Blake," and "Matisse says Thatcherism fails to recognise pleasure principle" or "Fra Angelico opposes Star Wars" will be some of the headlines.

But having plunged into politics — in his case, Labour Party politics — is the

artist tied to a party line? "I would hate that. Most parties are behind progressive thinking, but the kind of cultural policies pursued by the GLC (and I declare an interest) were quite enlightened.

"But culture is not politics by other means and you cannot reduce culture to politics. For an artist to illustrate Labour or Tory Party policy would be dreadful — like listening to the Archers all the time," he added.

So why does a socialist exhibit in New York? Because, according to Atkinson, they may not agree with what he has to say but at least they take it seriously. UK critics have tended to be abusive — Bernard Levin accused him of "poisoning the wells of art" and others have claimed he supports terrorism — whereas the Americans have been prepared to look and listen and, of course, buy. "I think it is to do with the British being uncomfortable with ideas — "that's why I feel comfortable in America." His 1979 exhibition "Material" spawned a group of artists in the United States who called themselves Group Material, drawing on Atkinson for subject matter and attitude.

Surprising as always, Atkinson's latest enterprise is a series of doormats — a blistering riposte to British Nuclear Fuels' "Welcome" doormat in its Sellafield campaign. In this case, his interest is that he was born in West Cumbria and his mother died of cancer.

By this means Conrad Atkinson welcomes us to a "Low Threshold," a "State of Readiness," a "State of Decay" — a decay both of radioactivity and of peoples' power to resist what is going on — and finally, "Welcome to the Seductiveness of the End of the World."