Introduction

The texts collected together in this Supplement cover a variety of topics, both in terms of discussion of theoretical issues (‘oppositional’ art, the Art Strike, and the concept of the avant-garde) and in the form of readings of particular works (the film Dead Poet’s Society, Greil Marcus’s Lipstick Traces, and the video recently distributed by Variant magazine ‘Workers’ City: the Subversive Past’). Notwithstanding a certain diversity of interests these pieces all exist as fragments of a singular vessel or issue which Here and Now is concerned to foreground for discussion. This is the question of the importance of art, and of its sporadically apparent shadow ‘anti-art’ to political life. Looking at such an issue is of course to raise the question of what ‘art’ is, how it operates, and, more particularly the nature of the relations between art and Capitalism. Can one speak of art as a form of critique of commodity culture (as did Adorno) or is art, is ‘culture’ itself a kind of super-commodity, the thing ‘which helps sell all the others’, as a well-known Situationist cartoon suggests? Many claims for the existence of a link between politics and art (in the widest sense of those terms) have been made - these pages hopefully go some way towards unpacking such claims.

Note: the following pages include a number of reproductions of drawings by Henri Zo, commissioned by Raymond Roussel in 1932 as illustrations for his Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique (Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1963).
Adventures in the Culture Zone

Angus McDonald writes: The following manuscript from one who styles himself "a former countercurator of the legacy" reached us just in time for inclusion. We include it now because we feel it raises issues of no real importance which might nonetheless interest you.

The relation between the purity of a personal project and its recognition by others is fraught with peril. A certain degree of recognition by others confirms that you exist, but too much interpretation by others takes the project away from its originators, and feels like a loss of control.

Recent interpretations of the work of the Situationist International bear witness to the dilemma. The ICA show, and associated publicity, such as the Late Show review (with Sarah Dunant, in her own words, "deriving" towards a camera) might at first seem worthy only of the response manifested by those outside protesting against recuperation. The banality of the Late Show review certainly deserves a lambast, and the ICA organisers' decision to incessantly show the thing on video at the exhibition reveals no wish to distance themselves from its view of the SI as cultural novelty.

Equally, questions deserve to be asked of the role of organiser Peter Wollen, whose temerity in claiming to be engaged in unearthing a valuable project hitherto neglected, is an act of considerable hypocrisy. Consider for a moment why this project was neglected within the cultural studies milieu of early '70s Britain - because any project identified as perhaps occupying an "existentialist/Hegelian Marxist" niche was passe to the point of contempt as far as the arbiters of theoretical fashion were concerned, from their lofty perch upon the Althusserian crest of scientific structuralism. Ask any media studies student of that decade to name a chief perpetrator of this dreary stuff, and it won't be long until our man's magnum opus is upon the lips - step forward, "Signs And Meaning In The Cinema". Author? None other than Peter Wollen! So, our intrepid unearther of the SI is the same man who was shovelling the shit over the project in the first place.

But bitching in the style of the last paragraph is so easy (and fun) that it might be well to try something else. The anti-recuperationists outside the ICA won the day because they didn't just protest, they made a counter exhibition more loyal in its childishness and petulance to the spirit of the SI than the show indoors (and funnier), which didn't quite succeed in allaying the fear that they see themselves as counter-curators of the SI legacy. It must be conceded that the arrogance of the SI was such that they would expect their work to be at the unavoidable centre of discussions of the 20th century avant-garde, and would consider it no more than their due that such a show occur. The worry is not recuperation but dissipation. Just as the Channel 4 overkill on the 20th anniversary of 1968 created and transmitted so much indifferent material that 1988 represented the last time that an enquirer might learn anything relevant about those events, without first having to shadow-box with a smoke-screen, likewise the ICA show for the SI.

Which is where I began: too many people now know a little about what a few used to rigorously investigate. The lament of the cultist - its not a private party anymore. And that's certainly a useless dead end.

Two strategies for hurling the wall present themselves: that of Greil Marcus, that of Stewart Home. Marcus's "Lipstick Traces", thought by at least one to be "the nadir of intellectual hubris in the 20th century" instead appears to me an inventive leap beyond the problem of reiterating the now rather tired collation of the facts concerning the case of the SI. Marcus makes the project personal again, inviting the reader to share his enthusiasm for the inspirational possibilities which still lie immanent within a few brief moments in time over which rather too many persons have passed recently. Of course, as objective history, his account is incoherent, but as his reading, it reminds me of why I got excited about this stuff in the first place. And the music.

Excitement about this stuff and the music is one of the monuments exploded by Home's "Pure Mania", a better fiction history than "The Assault On Culture", which still bore the traces of the countercurator. Better because far funnier, and also far more sweetly subversive - after "Pure Mania" it is just no longer possible to be pompously self-important about "the legacy". This other route to re-instating the personal relies on an esoteric but accessible meshing of in-jokes which I'm certainly not going to waste by interpretation. The Blitz reviewer reckoned Home could only tell this joke once, forgetting that we dig repetition. The limits of the series are co-extensive with the number of good-but not evil songs of the era to be remembered by the readership. Rumour suggests the existence of "Defiant Pose"; "Incendiary Device"; "Borstal Breakout" and "Fascist Dictator" cannot be far behind. (And I'm boycotting his boycott, silencing his silence and plagiarising his plagiarism by saying nothing about the other thing.)

1 Polygon, 1989.
On the Art Strike

The following texts are extracted from the 'Art Strike Handbook' edited by Stewart Home (London, 1989).

ART STRIKES

In his section of the Art Into Society/Society Into Art catalogue (ICA, London 1974), Gustav Metzger issued a call for a three-year strike by artists. Metzger believed that if artists acted in solidarity, they could destroy those institutions (such as Cork Street) which had a negative effect on artistic production. Metzger's strike failed because he was unable to mobilise support from other artists.

During martial law in Poland artists refused to exhibit their work in state galleries, leaving the ruling elite without an official culture. For months the art galleries were empty. Eventually some mediocre artists were discovered who were prepared to take advantage of this situation and their work was shown. The Polish intelligentsia immediately organised an effective boycott of openings, denying the art an audience and the bureaucracy any credibility.

In 1985 the PRAXIS group proposed an Art Strike for the three years between 1990 and 1993. In 1986 this proposal was extended to a more generalised 'refusal of creativity'. The idea was not to destroy the art world. PRAXIS doubted that enough solidarity existed between artists for such a strategy to work. PRAXIS were interested in how they, and many other 'activists' had created identities based on the supposed 'superiority' of their 'creativity' and/or political actions to the leisure and work pursuits of the social majority. This belief in individual superiority was seen as impeding a rigorous critique of the reigning society. Put bluntly, those whose identity is based on 'their opposition' to the world as it is, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. To change the world it is necessary to abandon those character traits which aid survival in capitalist society.

Stewart Home
(first published in Edinburgh Review 80-1, Summer '88)

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ART STRIKE 1990-1993

When the PRAXIS group declared their intention to organise an Art Strike for the three year period 1990-1993, they fully intended that this proposed (in)action should create at least as many problems as it resolved.

The importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war. The Art Strike addresses a series of issues; most important amongst these is the fact that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be actively and aggressively challenged. Simply making this challenge goes a considerable way towards dismantling the mental set 'art' and undermining its hegemonic position within contemporary culture, since the success of art as a supposedly 'superior form of knowledge' is largely dependent upon its status remaining unquestioned.

Other issues with which the Art Strike is concerned include that series of 'problems' centred on the question of 'identity'. By focusing attention on the identity of the artist and the social and administrative practices an individual must pass through before such an identity becomes generally recognised, the organisers of the Art Strike intend to demonstrate that within this society there is a general drift away from the pleasures of play and simulation; a drift which leads, via codification, on into the prison of the 'real'. So, for example, the role-playing games of 'children' come to serve as preparation for the limited roles 'children' are forced to 'live' out upon reaching 'maturity'. Similarly, before an individual can become an artist (or nurse, toilet cleaner, banker &c.), they must first simulate the role; even those who attempt to maintain a variety of possible identities, all too quickly find their playful simulations transformed (via the mechanics of law, medical practice, received belief &c.) into a fixed role within the prison of the 'real' (quite often literally in the case of those who are branded schizophrenic).
The organisers of the Art Strike have quite consciously exploited the fact that within this society what is simulated tends to become real. In the economic sphere, the strike is an everyday action; by simulating this classic tactic of proletarian struggle within the realm of culture we can bring the everyday reality of the class war to the attention of the 'avant-garde' fraction within the bourgeoisie (and thus force academics, intellectuals, artists &c., to demonstrate whose side they are really on). At present the class struggle is more readily apparent in the consumption of culture (cf. Bourdieu) than in its production; the Art Strike is in part an attempt to redress this imbalance.

While strikes themselves have traditionally been viewed as a means of combating economic exploitation, the Art Strike is principally concerned with the issue of political and cultural domination. By extending and redefining traditional conceptions of the strike, the organisers of the Art Strike intend to increase its value both as a weapon of struggle and a means of disseminating proletarian propaganda. Obviously, the educative value of the strike remains of primary importance; its violence helps divide the classes and leads to a direct confrontation between antagonists. The deep feelings aroused by the strike bring out the most noble qualities of the proletariat. Thus both the General Strike and the Art Strike should be understood in terms of social psychology, as intuitive mental pictures rather than actions which have been rationally theorised.

In 1985, when the PRAXIS group declared their intention to organise an Art Strike for the period 1990-1993, it resolved the question of what members of this group should do with their time for the five year period leading up to the strike. This period has been characterised by an on-going struggle against the received culture of the reigning society (and has been physically manifested in the adoption of multiple identities such as Karen Eliot and the organisation of events such as the Festival Of Plagiarism). What the organisation of the Art Strike left unresolved was how members of PRAXIS and their supporters should use their time over the period of the strike. Thus the strike has been positioned in clear opposition to closure - for every 'problem' it has 'resolved', at least one new 'problem' has been 'created'.

Stewart Home
FEATuRES

When Blowing the Strike is Striking the Blow

In this article Sadie Plant questions the radical claims made on behalf of the Art Strike.

‘those whose identity is based on their opposition to the world as it is, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.’

Stewart Home.

Thus the Dadaists watched their anti-art works being categorised as works of art, and aimed their whole project at the evasion of this recuperation. After five years of agitation against capital, war, and morality, they reached an impasse of suicide or silence. Everything they made or said or wrote was turned against its critical purpose and used against them. Since they were not in control of the categorisation of their work, they were merely producing ammunition for other side, the cultural establishment. So they scrapped the whole project. In effect, like the cultural workers of the 1980s, they decided to go on strike.

The Dadaists left a legacy which has indeed been recuperated in the form of commodified works of art, use of their techniques of collage and photomontage in advertisements, and the presentation of their work in coffee table books and university seminars. They were right to believe that this was inevitable as long as they were merely producing, and not controlling the means of production. But on the way, they did constitute a challenge to bourgeois morality, the philosophical assumptions on which it was based, and the propaganda of the first world war which legitimised its brutality. In the end they felt that their subversions of established values were merely contributing to the culture they wished to destroy. The question became one of whether their participation outweighed their silence as the most effective weapon. It was not a matter of giving up the struggle, but the use of giving up as a means of struggle.

Like the art strikers, the Dadaists recognised that both art and the artist are as guilty in their participation as any other commodity or worker. This perspective has far more validity than that adopted by Marcuse and Adorno, who argued that the Dadaist project was misguided in its attacks on conventional art. They considered that art has an autonomy and distance from capitalist relations which must be preserved rather than undermined: art bears an essential negativity derived from its peculiar Form: its rearrangements of reality are conducted on principles of order quite alien to those of capitalism. This Form renders art a

‘refuge and a vantage point from which to denounce the reality established through domination.’

摧毁这艺术品 | 保存这艺术品

Destroy this Artwork | Preserve this Artwork
during the Art Strike 1990-93
during the Art Strike 1990-93

Any active dissent can be commodified, turned into a product useful for the maintenance of capitalism. The slogans of revolutionary politics are used to sell bank accounts; the painting that challenges beauty and form is placed in the gallery where its beauty and form are admired and valued and bought and sold; the biting poem is read on the radio to accompany the liberal critics’ display of sorrow at the state of the world. Whatever is said against can be made to speak for; like any weapon, art can be turned against those who use it.

The art strikers have emerged out of a tradition of avant-garde culture which has recognised these problems and continually agitates against what it has defined as the recuperation of criticism. In different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Situationists all realised that anything they produced could be integrated into the structures they opposed.

‘Whatever doesn’t kill power is killed by it’.

HERE’S A LOT TO BE SAID FOR THE ART STRIKE, which is just as well, since between 1990 and 1993 nothing can be written or painted or performed in its support. There’s something to be said against it too - no time limit here - and plenty of room for dissent.

Art strike propaganda claims that an artists’ strike will have the effect of bringing the class struggle to the artistic realm. It argues that the most radical art and the most critical artists are actually supporting capitalist social relations even when they purport to subvert them; artistic practice must therefore cease since it stabilises and nourishes the social relations its more oppositional forms claim to contest.

This argument is akin to a wider challenge made by postmodern philosophers such as Baudrillard, who argue that criticism is no longer possible and that the only efficient way of dissenting from capitalist society is to commit suicide. The Art Strike Handbook quotes Baudrillard:

‘Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything. If it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction consumed.’

毁掉这件艺术品 | 保存这件艺术品

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Although Adorno and Marcuse criticised the anti-artists for attacking artistic Form, they concurred with the avant-garde aim of ending the distinction between art and the rest of reality. Indeed, Marcuse wished to see a society organised according to the aesthetic principles he saw preserved in art. But they both argued that the achievement of this integration was not a task in which artists can participate. Art must remain a realm in which calm reflection can remind us of the truths of an authentic life which will be achieved, after the revolution.

Expressing their rejection of this view in different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Situationists worked for the collapse of the distinctions between art and the rest of life in the here and now. Rather than waiting until after the revolution, they argued that the integration of art and life was fundamental to the achievement of revolution, which is possible only because of the subjectification of capitalism to continual attack on all fronts: ideological, cultural, and economic.

If art is an area of contestation like any other, it is also an area of integration and recuperation. The art strike is a recognition of this double role: it brings industrial struggle to art, challenges artists to jeopardise their careers and identities in the same way as other striking workers, and demands that those who continue to work justify their lack of solidarity. It also presupposes that art is integral to capitalist relations, and that the recuperation of critical or radical art is an inevitable attribute of this society. But the art strike is merely one way of tackling this situation, and can only be effective if it is regarded as a tactic in the struggle against capitalism rather than the end of tactics. By enlisting Baudrillard in the defence of the strike, its protagonists are in danger of confusing these roles.

Baudrillard argues that the history of criticism, including the Dada experience, shows that recuperation is inevitable, and that a belief in the possibility of critical art or any other discourse is naive. This renders criticism pointless, and places the critic in an unjustifiable position. Participation in the networks of power it attacks will always be supportive of them, and silence, apathy, and the refusal to contribute or participate in the debate are the only valid responses to existing society. So Baudrillard says nothing? Far from it. He produces books, articles and academic papers by the dozen, most of which are couched in mystified and complex terminology which makes them inaccessible to all those without the opportunity to study them. The disengagement he proposes is strictly for other people; the masses express their dissent through passivity while the philosophers continue to profit from and, by their own arguments, support the capitalist system of relations they purport to be attacking.

Anyone who does refuse to be creative for the three years of the art strike will be less hypocritical than Baudrillard but not necessarily more critical. At the logical extreme of Dada’s suicide, Baudrillard’s philosophy, or today’s art strike, is the view that it would have been more damaging to capitalism if nothing had ever been created. Then there would be no ideas or art works to recuperate, and capitalism would have been deprived of a part of its cultural support. But where there is nothing to be recuperated, there is nothing to fight with: the capitalist establishment might be disarmed, but so would its opponents.

If there is one characteristic of capitalism we may be sure of, it is that nothing can escape it. But faced with an impossible situation, the loud and active search for possibilities is an alternative to silent passivity. Nothing can escape the saboteur either, and the legacy left by Dada and others is part of an armoury which can be plundered by the subversive as well as the establishment. The culture of the past must not be destroyed or abandoned, but superseded in its use for ‘partisan propaganda purposes’. In the present. This can easily be attacked as a form of liberal reformism, changing from within, etc. But we do live within capitalism, and there is no such thing as change from without. The question becomes one of how the change from within must be pursued. The strike is one answer, but it is just as likely that the most effective anti-capitalist artists are those who work as saboteurs.

Their awareness of the recuperation of their work does not petrify them; instead, they use this recognition to sidestep and expose the mechanisms, recuperation amongst them, which perpetuate capitalism.

The value of the art strike is in its proposal of silence, rather than silence itself, the propaganda rather than the deed. The art strike must be seen as a means of exposing, rather than escaping recuperation. Art strike propaganda reveals the extent of recuperation and proposes an action which cannot be recuperated. But anything which is totally vulnerable to recuperation cannot be used in contestation either. Although the art strike propaganda is meaningless without the art strike, the strike is also useless without the propaganda. Inaction must first be justified and explained through action; you have to say why you’re going to be silent. The art strikers claim that the tactics of industrial struggle are being brought to art, but the strike is not the only industrial weapon, and artists have always taken their techniques of sabotage and subversion from workers. Disputes vary according to the nature of the work in question: although car workers might well stop making cars, printers might prefer to print their own propaganda rather than stop printing.

The art strike is a valid response to the problems of criticism, but it is not the only one. It is a good thing only insofar as it produces more radical art, of which its own propaganda is a perfect example. Consequently it is a good thing only in its failure, and since this is inevitable, the art strike is necessarily a good thing. Once put into the world, tactics such as this can be used by anyone for any ends. So long may such active resistance continue! Here’s to the saboteurs, the double agents, those who turn the world around! Don’t strike, occupy!

1 Art Strike Handbook, p. 38
4 Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, ‘Methods of Detournement’, Situationist International Anthology, p. 9
Remarks on the Category «Avant-Garde»

In an age of the over-production of avant-gardes Peter Suchin discusses their genealogy and destiny.

IN WHAT FOLLOWS I AM GOING TO ATTEMPT TO give an outline—though a very general one—of what might be termed the avant-garde art practices of the early twentieth century. In using this term I am following the distinction offered in Peter Burger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde, between, on the one hand modernism and on the other the avant-garde. Burger’s terms are deployed in a very specific manner but I will extend them. I will use ‘avant-garde’ to refer to those artists and practices which claim some kind of political intention whilst asserting modernism as a label for those phenomena which are or were concerned with radicalising the formal aspects of art making. The two areas are not entirely distinct but employing such a division should help in the task of clarifying the various territories of politically-concerned art. Insofar as the avant-garde is the central focus of my account the general artistic changes taking place around the turn of this century may be viewed as a background to my central theme. What occurred at this period was the breakdown of the erstwhile unity of art, the ending of a tradition in which realistic depiction held the central role. Art fragmented into a cluster of styles or schools—mutually exclusive, self-determining and highly competitive vis-à-vis claims for their own superiority or correctness with regard to their place within art. Thus Picasso and Braque’s Cubism advocated a more realist rendition of the world, as did in their various ways Expressionism, Futurism, Neoplasticism, Fauvism et al. These and other schools promoted various positions, some of which held to utopian intentions. For example, the Bauhaus project of transforming society through the interlinking of developments in art and technology did not deviate, despite its moral concerns, from the modernist norm of presenting art as a leading force for social change. What the Bauhaus and many other groups did not do is question the very institution of art itself. It was, according to Burger’s model, those more reflexive entities—Dada, Surrealism and beyond Europe Russian Constructivism which came to a realisation that ‘art’ was not a timeless or neutral category but rather a construct particular to bourgeois culture. These avant-garde groups recognised the institutional status of art and it was their concern not merely to attack or dismiss earlier artistic styles but the very category of art itself. By the ‘institution of art’ is meant both the distribution apparatus upon which the work of art depends and the status of art in bourgeois society. In particular the avant-garde took as their target that mid to late nineteenth century movement known as Aestheticism, the central tenet of which was, following Gautier, ‘Art for Art’s sake’, the severing, that is, of art from life. From the viewpoint of the avant-garde Aestheticism was not seen as a refusal of the capitalist transformation of culture but as something which resulted from it, insofar as capitalist change encouraged the development of specialist spheres of activity. Art was a special area retained for bourgeois pleasure, an attempt to isolate art from commodity values by its closing of ranks, choosing to withdraw from, rather than engage in a confrontation with capital.

In contrast, Dada did not represent itself as a new type of art but as the negation of art, including, paradoxically, any ‘art’ elements it happened, for whatever reason, to take on board. In Burger’s presentation the use of collage, the incorporation of real pieces of the world into objects which appeared within the frame of ‘art’ was as a device to disrupt the unity of the work, to mock and to destroy bourgeois art and not, as in Cubist work, as an expansion of the reality elements of the work. Similarly, Duchamp’s presentation, in 1914, of a mass-produced object, a bottlerack, in an art context was not intended as a widening of art’s boundaries but as a critique, however humorously carried out, of the institution of art.

Though Dada was the first ‘movement’ or comprehensive gathering to undertake a critique of the art institution there had previously appeared several elements of what would come to be a kind of ‘tradition’ of critique. Each component of this tradition links in some way to the formation of that concept of the avant-garde which today has been naturalised, rendered central to the fabric of contemporary art practice. The notion of the artist as a harbinger of a future utopian condition is now a kind of cliché. There is certainly some confusion over whether or not innovations in form automatically align with prospective social change. The implications of Burger’s distinction between modernism and the avant-garde, the rigour of his division, is not generally held amongst the art community today. Notwithstanding this confusion the history of the ‘advanced guard’ as a metaphor applied to the art context is an important one. It is a piece of terminology which was initially at home within military strategy. The advanced guard was a party which was sent out from the main body of troops in
order to ascertain the status of the terrain ahead. The main body of
the army follows the pathbreaking movements of the advance party
through what had hitherto been unexplored territory. It appears
that the first application of the idea with regard to the role of the artist
was in the writings of the utopian-socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, notably
in a text entitled "Social Organisation," published in 1825, the year
of Saint-Simon's death. In the relevant passage Saint-Simon suggests
that:

...the artists, the men of imagination will open the march;
you will take the Golden Age from the past and offer it as a
gift to future generations; they will make society pursue
passionately the rise of its well-being, and they will do this
by presenting the picture of new prosperity; by making
each member of society aware that everyone will soon have
a share in enjoyment, which up to now has been the
privilege of an extremely small class... for the attainment
of their goal they will use all the means of the arts,
elocution, poetry, painting, music..."

There is a clear allusion here to the military situation I have mentioned
above. By something of a paradox the artist is presented as someone
who is part of an elite which has as its aim the destruction of elites.
One could further subdivide the concept of the artistic avant-garde
into two sub-classes, one whose position is in line with Saint-Simon's,
in which the artist subordinates him or herself to serving revolutionary
aims, the other group arguing that art itself holds a revolutionary
potential. Both of these positions keep, however, to the view that life,
and not merely the practices of art should be transformed.

In this quotation from Rimbaud we find not only the idea of the artist
being in advance of other 'citizens' despite his use of that word but
also a reference to the seeking out of novelty. The notion of looking
for or constructing 'the new' is of course an implicit aspect of the very
idea of the avant-garde but this explicit mention of 'the new' brings it
to mind another poet's comments on novelty. I am referring here to the
again famous definition of 'modernity' put forward by Charles
Baudelaire in his 'The Painter of Modern Life' of 1863. 'Modernity',
he writes, 'is that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent upon the
occasion; it is half of art, whose other half is the eternal and
unchangeable.'

Baudelaire's argument is a complex one but it seems to centre upon
the idea that each period of the past has its own particular moment of
modernity, its own distinct set of aesthetic values. It thus follows that
artists cannot learn their craft by studying past examples of art, at
least not to the level of intensity required to produce a specifically
contemporary aesthetic. Baudelaire's use of the term 'modernity' is
itself an idiosyncratic one, one which emphasises the 'presentness'
of the contemporary.

To talk of Baudelaire's concept of modernity within the context of a
discussion of the avant-garde as I have defined it may seem a little
strange but what I want to emphasise is the way Baudelaire sees the
role of the contemporary artist from that of his or her predecessors.
There is an imperative within Baudelaire's model, the implication
that one ought to be modern, to be of one's time. Walter Benjamin
has taken the position that it was Baudelaire who first realised
nineteenth century capitalism had placed the artist in a new situation
with respect to the distribution of his or her work. Baudelaire saw
that art's real status in the nineteenth century was that of a commodity,
and that the artist, as a consequence of this was merely one more
producer of goods which, like other commodities had to find a space
in the marketplace. This realisation is itself critical in that it is,
among other things a kind of recognition of the eventual institutionalisation
of the avant-garde. If capitalism's concern is the repeated production
of a spurious novelty then novelty as a watchword of the avant-garde
would eventually be reduced to little more than a kind of style. This
indeed appears to be what has happened now that much art comes
with a kind of built-in 'radicality', a frisson of 'criticality' that disturbs
nothing and no-one. Roland Barthes has said that:

'A creative experience can be radical only if it attacks the
real, i.e., the political, structure of society. Beyond the
personal struggle of the avant-garde writer, and whatever
its exemplary force, there always comes a moment when
Order recalls its vanguard.'

The title of the essay from which this extract is taken is itself interesting:
"Who's Theatre? Whose Avant-Garde?" Barthes suggests that
even the Surrealists offered but a deviation, in effect a minor one,
from bourgeois norms. He would appear to be implying that the notion
of the avant-garde group is one specific to bourgeois culture and
something which in practice always chooses to dissolve itself at
the point of its most extreme effect. Despite adopting the tactics of political
contestation - manifestos, announcements and the like - neither the
Dadaists nor the Surrealists were successful in their attempts to
change lives. Peter Bürger too notes their lack of real effectivity,
painting out that the main result of their presence in the intellectual
and artistic maps of the twentieth century is the revelation that the
entity 'art' is a culturally specific institution, one which their concerted
attacks failed, most evidently, to destroy.

'Note: This talk was given in Leeds on Wednesday, July 26, 1989 at
a meeting at the West Yorkshire Discussion Group. It has not been
revised for publication, though details of material cited in the text, as
well as other relevant sources, have been added.'
References

Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, Manchester University Press, 1984


See Also:


Daglid Sonoloet, Review of Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, Telos, No. 61, Fall 1984.


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Reply to P.S.

The following is a response to the discussion which accompanied the original presentation of Peter Suchin.

I’m very unhappy with the kind of discussion that emerges from this way of looking at the history of the radical art movements: with questions such as: whether the various avant garde movements may be said to have ‘failed’ to bring about social & political change, and: whether the idea of an avant garde was still relevant to today either in the self-consciousness of artists or in contemporary culture at large.

The issue of social critique (i.e. that sort of social changes were being projected, and what is meant by calling such intentions political) was hardly even touched upon, and the bugbear of ‘recuperation’ still seemed to crop up (the word may not have been used much but the concept was certainly present) as a surrogate for the analysis of effects. For my part, I agree with Stewart Home’s comment that this is a debilitating concept that both imputes to the movements allegedly ‘recuperated’ a critical rigour they may not deserve, as well as exaggerating the ‘recuperative’ power of the so-called system. (This point was made a propos the SI at the ICA: notes reprinted in Smile No. 11). The upshot of using such a notion is, of course, to impose a convenient fatalism and a fruitless abstractionism about the capitalist system whose historical character and actual workings are accordingly never examined. (I am not claiming, of course, that SH himself has yet got beyond this abstractionism - his own work may be most valuable precisely as an ironic demonstration of the poverty of this artistic radicalism. These issues need to be dealt with in any critical engagement with projects such as Stewart Home’s.

In this context, Carol Duncan’s point that the avant garde is itself the official art of our time, which “occupies this place because, like any official art, it is ideologically useful” (cited by Peter Smith Oxford Art Journal) is relevant. Do we all really know enough yet about how the art market works and what uses are made of artists? I felt that Peter Suchin’s paper, whilst emphasizing the centrality of a supposed ‘radicality’ to the fabric of contemporary art practice, tended to slip back in the end into a version of the ‘recuperation’ thesis, referring to an “eventual institutionalization” and failure (sic) to “change life” as somehow inevitable (echoes of Baudrillard’s Strategies Fatales?).

It seems to me of absolutely vital importance to consider more concretely what exactly the terms ‘radical’ and ‘critical’ actually mean in particular instances, rather than using these terms as if they had some automatically positive value in all contexts. This may involve, among other things, distinguishing movements or ideas which were either intentionally or merely potentially moving in the right direction about whose judgements about success or failure might therefore be appropriate) from movements or ideas which are essentially part of the very workings of the capitalist art system. To say that the latter ‘fail’ seems beside the point: notions of success/failure presuppose reference to purposes or at least possibilities. What surely ought to be done is to discover what actual changes are being effected in social existence and the role played in these by ‘artistic’ activities. This was the thrust of my point about Futurism being, when considered in a wider sense than that of an ‘artistic’ avant garde, an enormously effective (‘successful’) cultural project on behalf of industrial capitalism in the 1930s and thereafter. An essential condition for pursuing this kind of analysis is to be, naturally, be to dispense with the idea of capitalism as a fixed eternal ‘system’ (endlessly & automatically reproduced, and with an infinite capacity for recuperation etc) and also to dispense with its corollary, the idea that a better society than capitalism must be sought from something ‘progressive’, i.e. some development associated with an already established capitalist conception of newness.

I wouldn’t, however, want to encourage the sort of sheep-and-goats approach to the history of art that such discriminations might suggest. A hallmark of the sterile abstractionism of most avant gardism is their tendency to use such a dichotomy: all that which exists is ‘established’ (equals oppressive, equals bad); that which denounces it and ‘subverts’ it is ipso facto liberatory. Maybe these knee-jerk associations of destruction with emancipation, of criticism with change are no longer valid to the world we live in, if indeed they ever were. Do we need to get out of these old habits of thinking (such as that of always trying to get out of old habits of thinking)?

These remarks may well not reflect the same concerns as other readers. I just feel that what Peter calls the “frisson of criticality” needs to be probed a bit further, rather than taking the notion as read and simply scorning self-styled critical artists for what they have not accomplished, art should be examined for what it actually does do. Is this a banal thing to say?

M.P.
The Subversive Past

Review of the video Workers City.

As Glasgow continues to receive cosmetic effects and a form of corporate culture as a means of rejuvenating its economy, and smashing its communities, it is fitting that a certain hegemony is countered by "Workers City", a video document comprising of interviews with four people active in disseminating political ideas that have not only been "censored" by the ruling class but by the pundits of the official left. These ideas are those that have maintained a critical awareness, ideas that have been nurtured through conflict, pointing to an autonomy, a necessary "self-determination" for the working classes. It is in this sense that the experiences made central in this video run counter to capitalist developments and voice concerns shared throughout society. One such development, the renewed production of social space, visible in all former industrial cities, is one pointer towards a consolidation of capitalism's generating profits away from the "factory" and into society as a whole. This makes imperative an evaluation and an excavation of working class history, its errors as well as its cultural aspects which become prominent as the challenge to capital's "production" of value extends beyond the allotted time of "concrete labour".

Farquar McLaren, John Taylor Caldwell, James D. Young and Hamish Henderson map out areas of such a combative history, their diverse approaches finding common ground in their commitment to projects that originally stemmed from a reaction to the Bolshevikisation of the working class movement. This Bolshevik "model" whilst polemically speaking of the "independent creativity of ordinary working people" in practice stifled such activity (the recuperation of the soviets) to re-activate state power and carry through a blue-print that returns us to an absolutism. This strait-jacketing of political activity, its formulating a technique of action, implies that discussions take place only among "engineers" who act out a mechanical plan, concentrating the movement of history into an apparatus. It is, therefore, no great surprise that the Third International attempted to control the working class movement by emphasising that it become involved with already existing organisations; social-democracy and the unions which would inculcate the dependence amongst people necessary for the seizure of state-power and hence give to the working classes the "reflection" of their "represented power". This strategy acted to paralyse the movement by its faith in traditional structures whose result is the continuance of an image of the working classes as passive, as being acted upon rather than acting.

This may appear to be an inconsequential digression but the process described above has at its centre an economic fetishism, that by viewing the problem of exploitation as one primarily associated with ownership of the means of production, thereby upholds and defends the (capitalist) means of production as liberating. This centrality of the relations of production eclipse the reciprocal relation between all forces operative in society, resulting in a worship of "production" and the emplacement of a scientific consciousness.

The contributors to "Workers City" react against this streamlining, as also expressed by the parties of social-democracy, to talk of a "working class experience" that is obscured by such a professionalisation of social struggle that acts to depoliticise the daily life of people. This balance is partially redressed through the mediums of poetry, biography, folk song and historical research that re-represent an institutional silencing, and take encouragement from the "cultural sediments of the past". James D. Young talks of the relevance of John McLean; his attempts in the early 1920's to set up a 4th International with Sylvia Pankhurst and James Larkin, his links with Debs in the U.S.A., his imprisonment and concern over the national problem. James Caldwell, whilst talking of the "anarchist" Guy Aldred, mentions "misconceptions over the origin of the British Communist Party", about how the CP represented an Orthodoxy out of context with a vigorous anti-parliamentarian politics. Hamish Henderson talks of the School of Scottish studies established in 1951 and the need for an elaboration of Scottish folk culture as a "concrete political factor". Farquar McLaren traces his involvement with anarchist politics, casting suspicion over "educators" and expressing his bitterness over the "Cultural City" tag creating a "ghetto of greed" in Glasgow's centre.

However, "Worker's City" does not mourn the passing of a golden age of working class militancy, it leaves this to a labour movement whose bourgeois credentials blind it to the effects of unceasing institutional violence. Here, the past is not considered as a completed episode nor is it used to nostalgically detract from current forms of oppression. Instead history is seen as a living component retaliating against the "history of a consumer culture with its tendency towards homogenisation and encapsulation within a "time" governed by the pseudo-movement of the market. In this sense, working class history takes on a subversive impact, it makes apparent the core contradictions and attest to a tradition of contestation that jeopardises the illusions of a capitalist progress. The tools of a formal historical research cannot equip us to ascertain the "informal struggle" of the working class which as an autonomous, anonymous collective activity has no place within formal organizations incubated by capital. With "Worker's City" the history presented allows us to gain a direction for the present based upon an "implicit daily hostility" to capitalist restructuring, re-situating a working class culture in a mosaic-like historical movement.

Howard Slater

"Workers City" is distributed by Variant:
76 Carlisle Street, Glasgow, G21 1EF.
Rebels without a Cause

Review of the film The Dead Poet's Society.

IT IS THE LATE 1950's AND THE SCENE IS AN ELITE New England prep school. We meet a group of the school's pupils returning at the start of a new term and then we meet their new English teacher. He is no ordinary English teacher. He does wacky things like stand on his desk. He calls the Introduction to their poetry book “excrement!” and makes them tear it out. Very soon he will change all their lives.

In imitation of something he had himself done as a pupil at this very same school, his most admiring pupils form a Dead Poets' Society. After dark they sit around in a cave smoking cigarettes and reading poetry. They begin to discover their true selves. One falls in love. Another becomes a beatnik and calls himself Niwanda. A third discovers his love for the stage. It is this particular passion which brings about the film's critical conflict.

The boy's father disapproves of his son's ambition and he is a man not to be trifled with. Against his father's specific injunction the son performs as Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream. He is a brilliant success. But unfortunately his father has sneaked in to check that his authority has not been flouted. In grim mood he takes his son home. He tells him he will never act again and that tomorrow he will be removed from the prep school and enrolled in a military academy. The boy tries to protest but words fail him. In the middle of the night he rises from his bed, takes his father's gun from his desk and kills himself.

There are far reaching repercussions. The English teacher is sacked. Niwanda is expelled. The others are forced to sign lying confessions. As Williams leaves his classroom for the last time, half the boys climb upon their desks in a gesture of spontaneous solidarity, while the headmaster fulminates impotently against their rebellion. The End.

"The Dead Poet's Society" has been well received critically and, perhaps more surprisingly, has been an enormous box office success. The big name of Robin Williams as the teacher is undoubtedly a major factor in the film's success but it can't explain all of it. Despite its rarefied setting and intellectual trappings, despite the mildness of the film, its lack of sex and violence and the gentleness of its rebellions, the theme is one hugely sympathetic to modern audiences - the defiance of authority and the overthrow of tradition. Here we have encapsulated the central paradox of modern cultural production; why do big corporations, with an obvious interest in the status quo, make glossy movies celebrating rebellion and the death of the old order?

"The Dead Poet's Society" pits an old regime specifically identified with discipline and tradition against a new way based on the ideal of self-fulfillment. The authority figures in the film reject the notion that teenage boys might be able to think for themselves. The ability to think for oneself, they claim, comes after an education; it is not part of the process. Robin Williams and his acolytes reject all deferred gratification. "Seize the time!" he instructs his boys in a prefiguration of Sixties revolutionary slogans. The notion of a slow maturing towards adulthood and its privileges is replaced with the notion that you can have it all and you can have it now.

It should come as no surprise that the film has been set in 1959, the threshold of the Sixties, and a time of great totemic significance to the kind of people who presently dominate the culture industry. Movie culture in particular presently posits twin chronologies of the past forty years, both in terms of movement; on the one hand from darkness to light, and on the other from innocence to knowledge. The Fifties then is both a time of innocence and darkness. The innocents, the schoolboys, are surrounded by the grim frowning figures of those in authority, portrayed here as beyond reason, soulless, lifeless, the Living Dead. In fact they resemble nothing less than the robotic shards of human beings who have been possessed by aliens, an unfortunate but common occurrence in Fifties paranoia flicks like Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Another comparison might be with professional wrestling. Wrestling is essentially a drama, a battle between darkness and light in which the "bad" characters, those with an effeminate or sadistic persona, allow the audiences to anathematise that which they fear in their own personalities. The grotesque caricatures which parade round wrestling rings can only have a symbolic function for the audience but they are symbols which allow the venting of deep emotion. Similarly the caricature authority figures of "The Dead Poet's Society" can produce noisy emotional reactions. Certainly on the night that I saw it the humiliation of the headmaster at the end was accompanied by cheering, whistling, and loud applause in some sections of the audience. One is left wondering to what extent the intensity of such reaction is prompted by strangely modern anxieties; the fear of that part of you which is boring, no fun, and repressive. Who's afraid of the big, bad Superego?
The fear of stuffiness and conformity is a modern phenomenon, to some extent created by, and certainly exploited by the cultural institutions which create the human environment in which capitalism flourishes. Only the Left equates rebelliousness with political opposition these days. In the world of advertising, of movies, of pop music, of politics, rebellion is good, especially among the young. In the last decade we have seen Conservatives appropriate the rhetoric of modernity and become the advocates of perpetual change. Rebellion is good because it ensures the continual transformation of attitudes and expectations vital to a society which requires the consumption and re-consumption of an ever changing range of artefacts for its survival. What modern culture promotes is the death of history and its replacement with a helter-skelter of change and non-attachment. Our age is not so much post-modern as post-historical.

The rebellion which "The Dead Poets' Society" celebrates is not one antithetical to modern capitalist society. Rather it is one of the mechanisms by which it prospers. It is a particularly individualistic rebellion: solidarity, for example, plays almost no part in it. There is no question of confronting the school as an institution; the only demand made of it is that girls be admitted.

But what is even more remarkable is that once told by Williams that each of them is exceptional and wonderfully talented, that all they need to do is to look within themselves and find their true selves, to and behold their true selves are absolutely exceptional and supremely talented. The would-be-actor is a very good actor. Here is another feature of therapeutic values; the false democracy of equal talents. It is, of course, likely that the would-be-actor would have been a lousy actor. Like most would-be-actors he would have existed hand-to-mouth in a succession of low-paid trash jobs, forever waiting for the call to stardom. The poets would have stayed unpublished, the musicians would have discovered that they were tone-deaf and the artists would find their work unsaleable. In the end most of them would have had to compromise their wonderful souls just to meet their material needs. The least fortunate and least principled among them might have ended up like Williams - teaching.

This false democracy is an ideological lynchpin of Capitalism: as everyone is equally and uniquely talented, then all it requires is determined action to "make it". In "The Dead Poets Society" it masks an undercurrent of elitism. The rich boys with their sensitive rebellion are contrasted with the louts of the football team from the local high school. Thick necked, violent, beer guzzlers one wonders what special talents they might have discovered if Williams had chosen a less privileged institution in which to teach. How many Beethovens have been lost to the Dallas Cowboys? Or is it only boys destined for Harvard Business School who have repressed artistic natures?

"The Dead Poets' Society" is a film of immense shallowness. It is a film which appeals to the adolescent's faith that only the imposed restrictions of his or her life prevents everything from being for the best in the best of all possible worlds. None of the members of the Dead Poets' Society has anything to declare but his genius. Authority, tradition, discipline are opposed because they are perceived to repress this supposed genius and for no other reason. No connection is made between the institution of the school and the wider world. Ordinary lives, when glimpsed, are portrayed as being coarse to the point of being grotesque. The privileged nature of the prep school is ignored; the film's condemnation of the school concerns itself only with the harm it does to the boys' souls.

By extension, the attack on traditional values in films such as "The Dead Poets' Society" becomes an attack on communal values as such. "The Dead Poets' Society" proclaims nothing more sacred than the duty to "find oneself". The individualism which Williams preaches leaves the boys incapable of solidarity. The last pathetic gesture of sympathy towards the departing teacher, the standing on desks, is too little too late. But then Williams, who made no gesture of solidarity himself when Niwanda was beaten earlier in the film, deserves no solidarity.

"The Dead Poets' Society" is a film the values of which typifies much of the culture industry's output. It celebrates rebelliousness against history itself and reiterates a major theme of modern commercial cinema, a chronology of the past forty years which has us moving from the time of the Great Innocence or Darkness through the Struggles of the Sixties to a Liberated Present. These films speak from the viewpoint of the triumph of the ideology for consumers, one which knows no values outwith the immediate, knows no aim but the glorification of the self. In the rebellion of the members of the Dead Poets' Society there is already something deadly. Suicide seems an apt conclusion.

Terry Delaney
A Cosmetic Underground

Review of *Lipstick Traces: a secret history of the twentieth century* by Greil Marcus (Harvard University Press)

Now that the prospect of economic unification within the European Community has become a rapidly approaching reality, many of the conglomerate's leading figures feel that the nations they control are going to achieve a position of dominance within the world. As a consequence, a number of previously obscure European cultural movements are being promoted in an attempt to challenge America's position of hegemony within the arts. Working backwards from punk rock, journalist Greil Marcus has set out to histify two of these rehabilitated groups by situating them in the context of a tradition which he traces back through dada to the beliefs of twelfth-century Christian heretics. Since Marcus is chiefly concerned with the recent past, he begins by telling us that:

'This book is about a single, serpentine fact: late in 1976 a record called *Anarchy In The U.K.* was issued in London, and this event launched a transformation of pop music all over the world. Made by a four-man rock 'n' roll band called the Sex Pistols, and written by singer Johnny Rotten, the song distilled, in crudely poetic form, a critique of modern society once set out by a small group of Paris-based intellectuals.'

The group of Paris-based intellectuals to whom Marcus refers were the Lettriste International who he claims were 're-founded in 1957 at a conference of European avant-garde artists as the Situationist International.'

A very crude form of reductionism is at work here, since to suggest that the Sex Pistols simply took up a critique elaborated by earlier avant-garde groups is to ignore historical, geographical and class difference. Likewise, the Situationist International (SI) was far more than a simple refounding of the Lettriste International (LI): it brought together a number of individuals who'd been involved with splinter groups from revolutionary surrealism and who wished to re-launch the surrealists project on a new footing. Particularly significant among the latter were Asger Jorn and Constant who'd previously held membership of the COBRA movement. While the LI had been a tiny Parisian grouplet, the SI (although few in number) counted among its members Algerian, Belgian, British, Danish, Dutch, French and Italian nationals. As a result, both the theory and practice of the SI were broader (and less coherent) than that of the LI. Thus we, while the LI emphasised the necessity of 'living' the cultural revolution, the SI — in its early years — produced works of art in far greater quantity (and many would say of a far higher quality) than the only group Marcus acknowledges as its precursor.

To return to the Sex Pistols, "Anarchy In The U.K." was not written by Johnny Rotten but by all four members of the band. This is one of many trivial misrepresentations which illustrate the author's refusal to come to terms with collective or collaborative projects. He reduces the Sex Pistols to their singer and the post-war avant-garde to a single member of the Situationist International, Guy Debord; two celebrities whose fame depersonalises them to such a degree that they've become representations of individuality rather than autonomous subjects consciously striking out in a direction of their own choice.

By transforming Rotten and Debord into figureheads of punk and situationism, by treating them as archetypes, Marcus simultaneously cancels out any sense of the specificity of the movements to which they belonged. Rather than seeing punk as a reaction on the part of a specific sub-strata of English society to rapid inflation, the growth of mass unemployment, the musical tastes of the preceding generation and the general sense of cultural devastation which ravaged Britain in the mid-seventies, Marcus treats it as little more than fall-out from left-bank bohemiannism. He has no sense of the fundamental difference between a trend within popular culture and the ideological beliefs of a tiny clique of intellectuals, such as the situationists, whose journals reached a peak circulation of a few thousand copies.
to be consumed as a series of narratives with which its audience could identify; central among these were stories of conflict between the dispossessed and those in authority (cf. Anarchy In The UK, God Save The Queen and White Riot). As a discourse punk subordinated form to content, whereas situationist theory which empowers aesthetic distancing (most obviously in the concept of 'the Spectacle') - albeit as a disagreeable phenomenon - reflects the concerns of bourgeois culture. Members of the punk community rarely considered the means by which they communicated (or the way in which they apprehended the world) to be problematic, whereas for the situationists Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation (Thesis 1 of Debord's Society of the Spectacle). Thus in the situationist critique, as in any bourgeois ideology, there is a tendency to liquidate meaningful content by subordinating it to form and formal innovation. The situationist assertion that the entire world is dominated by an essentially banal set of social and economic relations represents a particularly extreme version of this trend and willfully glosses over the differences between east and west, first and third world, popular and high culture - thereby discouraging resistance to localised oppression by clothing Power with a monolithic appearance.

Linked to the issues of class and taste is the process of hierarchisation. Marcus wants to elevate punk to the status of art and bring the lettriste and situationist movements into the accepted cannon of art history. The question as to how and why this process of canonisation takes place is never directly addressed by Marcus, although it seems reasonable to assume he's reflected upon the issue - since Lipstick Traces is simply one among many recent publications which have played a role in celebrating the work and personality of Guy Debord. The tendency in much of the secondary literature on the SI to view Debord as 'a genius' shifts attentin away from the issues addressed by the situationists and onto Debord's personal achievement in allegedly confronting capitalism.

The emphasis Marcus places upon personalities ultimately nullifies any sense of individuality which his subjects might possess. The links drawn between free spirit heretics and members of the lettriste, situationist and punk movements, are forged without acknowledgement of the fact that the former lived in feudal communities while the latter were attempting to effect change within industrialised societies. Since the mental sets and social networks of individuals living under capitalism are fundamentally different to those shared by members of a feudal community, comparisons between the two are specious.

The device used to link these diverse individuals and movements is the metaphor of the medium; Johnny Rotten is a passive creator whose body is taken over by what Marcus describes as 'the voice,' but which we might just as well call the muse, or God - because it's a higher authority. In his description of the last Sex Pistols concert, Marcus portrays Johnny Rotten as a puppet whose actions are controlled by an occult force:

'As in other moments on the same stage on the same night, as in so many moments on the singles the Sex Pistols put out over the previous year, he seemed not to know what he was saying. He seemed not to be himself, whoever that was, once more he was less singing a song than being sung by it.'

With the concept of 'the voice', a hidden authority which (dis)organises the world, Marcus abandons any need for a rational explanation of the events he describes. Such a mode of discourse has more in common with the simple faith of a priest than the considered reflections of a critic or historian; it is a creed which, with its refusal of difference, does a gross disservice both to the post-war avant-garde and the punk music Marcus claims to love.

Stewart Home

SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE THOUGHT STRIKE

The article "Demolish Seriousness" by Karen Eliot in Here & Now invites an assertion and exposition of the aims, objectives, and context-congruence of the (largely unconsciously) burgeoning Post-Serious Movement.

Post-Seriousness is the long-awaited, totally unanticipated dialectic resolution of the inherent ideological conflict between Anarcho-Pragmatism and the Zen Marxists. It becomes functionally inevitable at that point on the cruciality continuum when things have gone so far beyond a joke that all appropriate responses have ceased to be appropriate.

The fundamental error of the advocates of the Thought Moratorium is the idea that Seriousness needs to be demolished. Seriousness degenerated into ossified self-parody years ago. The Thought Moratorium is an idea with about as much relevance to the contemporary situation, as the current proposals within the Conservative Party, to challenge the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics at the European Court of Human Rights. Obvious parallels exist between the proposed Thought Moratorium and the Miners Strike of 1984-5. The seemingly obvious tactical mistake of the Strike, was to attempt to halt production of coal. The NUM leadership failed to perceive that the only appropriate response known to them, i.e. the withdrawal of labour, had become totally inappropriate, and served only to achieve the aims of their enemies. Similarly, the proponents of the Thought Moratorium, in proposing the cessation of an activity which has long since ceased to be performed anywhere South of the North Pole merely serve to ideologically legitimise the wielders of mental nitromors whom they seek to resist.

The Alternative Strategy, as proposed by the Post-Serious International, is a revival and diversification of direct cerebral action into a realm hitherto hegemonically defined as taboo; STRAIN YOUR BRAIN - Think that which has never been thought before - Think that which has previously been excluded from the definitive parameters of thought. The mass Media will collapse in the face of a population intensively contemplating the possible implications of a magnetic potato for the future of furniture design.

Karen Eliot enjoins us to destroy the traditions of the dead generations. Those have long since been destroyed. It's the traditions of the living which must be attacked, and those of the yet unconceived.

CONCLUDING UNARTISTIC POSTSCRIPT

These contributions have exhibited different ways of making an issue of the politics of 'art' as well as pointing to different ways out of the poverty of contemporary cultural 'radicalism'. It is not without interest, perhaps, that none of these pieces has anything good to say about art itself. Does the radical tradition still need to uphold the taboo on positive values?

The Art Strike is surely the proverbial last word in the sorry saga of anti-artism. It has the dubious virtue of providing for its own supersession by being a conscious simulation - a veritable mockery of itself. As pure negation, however, it would surely be more valuable if it were only a little more obviously insincere. But unfortunately it is in his silliest ideas that Stewart Home is being most serious. He really does believe that the critique of exchange-value entails the destruction of all values. The Art Strike may not quite deserve the faint praise Sadie Plant accords it.

What, after all, is the difference between Home's commitment (real or parodic, as it may be) to burying the 'artist', and the mindless praise of abstract rebelliousness which Terry Delaney exhumes from the 'Dead Poets Society'? Both equally shun the moral substance which some still find in art and others have sought in politics. Art as such may well be a travesty of its idealist apologies, but assaults on culture have usually been a prelude to atrocities against life. If the legacy of past avantgardisms is anything to go by, the world according to Stewart Home will surely come to pass in the worst form imaginable.

Is it the fate of countercultures to extend the boundaries of barbarism, to forge new weapons of exploitation and manipulation for succeeding generations? Magritte now sells cigarettes; Laban's modern choreography was made into a system of ergonomic calculation and discipline; and the Situationists' unitary urbanism has been realised in shopping malls and heritage centres: "Everyone shall live in their own theme-park", the slogan should have said.

In his review of the 'Workers' City' video, Howard Slater invokes the spectre of working class history as the subversive past of Europe's 1990 City-of-Culture, while Stewart Home finds in Greil Marcus's resurrection of dead heretics a more marketable nostalgia. But a revolutionary heritage is surely a contradiction in terms, whether proletarian/nationalist or mystical/apocalyptic. Glasgow's workers did not have to confront designer-blitz and the Cathars were not a punk band. History is only revolutionary when it is true. And subversions, as Angus Macdonald suggests, are only worth commemorating if they are - like artworks - good ones.

1 See Russell Berman's review of Martin Green, Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins, Ascona 1900-1920 (in Telos No. 74, 1987-88).