

cross-currents in culture ● volume 2 • number 2 • winter 1996 • free

variant



Editorial

Welcome to volume two of Variant, marking the re-launch of the magazine after a lengthy absence. It must be something of a rarity for a magazine which was 'killed off' to get the opportunity to discuss its demise; just like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn we have turned up at our own funeral.

Firstly we would like to thank all the many readers who wrote to the Scottish Arts Council in protest against their decision. We have tried to summarise the numerous issues brought up in some of the responses in the form of a letters page, which has the additional function of providing a link with the past and orienting our readership with the focus of the magazine. It will suffice to say here that none of the carefully reasoned arguments put forward met with anything like an appropriate response.

We have resurfaced at a crucial yet not altogether unfamiliar point, which in the interim period of our absence has witnessed this tendency to openly and routinely consign independent and critical voices to silence, developed into something approaching policy. From who's viewpoint will the history of the last two years in the arts in Scotland be constructed, will it be from diverse sources? Just as Variant's critical function had been defined as an urgent and diagnostic one, offered from a position of autonomy from vested interests (rather than operating as PR for the institutional art machine) it was targeted for closure. Was it really such an irony? It is our aim to carry forward Variant as a project with or without funding. As stated in the last editorial: "For the establishment of a critical, engaging and diverse culture, lateral links need to be made across media, and opinions need to be expressed and exposed."

Is it unreasonable to assume that, earlier than in any other industrial country, British governments began to make the avoidance of crises their first priority? That even before the era of full suffrage they had discovered how to exercise the arts of public management; extending the states power to assess, educate, bargain with, appease or constrain the demands of the electorate? That they created in Britain a political Gleichschaltung, and a financial Anstalt, subtle and loose enough to be resented only by 'deviants' and 'minorities'; and in which the challenges of Conservatism and Socialism were alike dispersed in a common reformist policy justified by an unreal assessment of historical tradition?

With comparatively limited resources we can sustain a much needed forum for debate based in Glasgow, which can move through the forces exerted by the administration of the arts in Scotland. It is our perception that the current climate seeks to stifle any deviation from the cultural packaging and re-packaging of a benign culture of entertainment. This imagined utopia, this "Disneyland without the rides," is a product of the repressive prioritisation of public funds which has become social Darwinism run wild. It is our intention to challenge this emerging culture of denial and its attendant language of competition, through debate and critical analysis.

In this, the re-launch issue, we have taken the decision not to put a specific type of exhibition review to the forefront, but rather take the opportunity to focus on more critical/theoretical issues. Our initial plan is to produce four magazines in the space of a year, each one expanding the possibilities of what Variant has previously achieved. Variant has always been part of, and aimed to represent ideas that are refused the hospitality of the would be 'mainstream,' which itself represents and replicates the ideological chastity of a tiny elite. With the new format comes a wider distribution (possibly the highest of any comparable magazine in the UK) and a wider readership; also the magazine is free!

"**Sycophancy:** Gr. *sykophantes*, usually said to mean one who informed against persons exporting figs from Attica or plundering the sacred fig trees; but more probably one who made rich men yield up their fruit (*lit.* to show a fig)."

The Beast that Would Not Die

THIS IS A collection of some of the responses sent to the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) by our readership, provoked by the withdrawal of Variant's funding which resulted in its closure. They are arranged here to represent a glimpse of the concerted effort in lobbying which was independently undertaken by a wide range of individuals and groups. In this case their efforts were ignored. The immediate question which arises from this (and other similar cases), would have to ask whether the SAC are in any way responsive to the opinion of the art community: given that they have openly defined themselves as not a 'democracy,' does this then mean that they are autocratic? What form should our approaches to them take—sycophancy?

This is something of an unusual—in that such a gathering would never normally have such exposure—but ever present and powerful combination of viewpoints. They have been edited down to focus on each individual's attempts to identify very real, yet unaddressed concerns. Although their concentration centred on Variant's plight, the predicament revealed still resonates strongly with the present climate. They have also been presented to provide a tentative model of what kind of concerted effort could be made, in the pages of this magazine to monitor and cast light on the activities of funding bodies in determining our culture.

"Responding to letters of support for Variant, from prominent critics and artists, SAC officers stated that it was not considered vital to the infrastructure of Scottish art."

Creative Camera

"Variant has survived resolutely for many years now in conditions which have left many arts organisations in a state of financial ruin—organisations that have subsequently been kept afloat by means of additional Arts Council funding. To pull the rug from under the feet of Variant at this stage is a truly short-sighted act of cultural vandalism..."

Transmission Committee

"In order to produce four issues in the forthcoming year, Variant required a substantial increase in its grant. After much discussion and consideration of the magazine's value, the Committee decided, in relation to other priorities, not to recommend this increase. Without an increase a continuation of the current grant of £21,000 would only have guaranteed two issues. The Committee decided that it could not justify continued funding on that basis..."

Andrew Nairne in reply to the above

"I cannot support this decision. You may have other ideas about publications from Scotland, but with Alba gone and now Variant it does seem perverse."

David Harding—Environmental Art GSA

"There will now be no focus for the debate and interchange of ideas that has been of such importance to Scotland's growing development as a significant cultural centre outside of London."

Entire MA student body GSA

"While all the various bodies with Scottish Arts Council support are of relative importance in helping artists to gain access to showing their work in public, it seems to me that there must also be a platform for consistent and considered critical debate on the general state of the arts. Any art scene worth its name would expect not one but a number of regular publications working to fulfil this very necessary function. That Scotland is lacking or being denied this essential critical facility must be a sad reflection on how seriously we take the intellectual and ethical role of art in Scottish society."

Bill Hare, Talbot Rice Gallery

"The fostering of critical debate is crucial to the well-being of any culture and any decision which makes critical debate less easy to engage in is, in my view, to be deplored."

Murdo Macdonald MA PhD LCAD, University of Edinburgh

"It seems particularly ironic that at a time when serious coverage of innovative visual arts in the national media is shrinking (even the Guardian now seems to have a policy of restricting its regional coverage to 'major' exhibitions) our specialist press is finding it increasingly difficult to command the support of its natural allies within arts funding... The majority of publications we subscribe to are quickly digested, often offering an unappetising fare of overlong interviews, unfocussed reviews, art gossip and dull layout."

Bryn Biggs, Bluecoat

"Without such barometers the arts industry will not be able to pace itself nor place itself within the rest of society: financially or culturally."

Mal Williamson, In House Video

"A chief factor in Variant maintaining and consolidating its reputation has been its independence from fashionable mainstream art thinking; not functioning merely as a curmudgeonly critical tool, but rather attempting to contextualise many different cultural facets in an intelligent and considered way."

Simon Herbert, Locus +

"I know from experience that it is virtually impossible to publish an art journal quarterly without substantial financial backing... I'll bring you up to date on what damage an earthquake can do to an arts organisation."

Thomas Lawson, California Institute for the Arts

"Information and education are the central aspects for the European Countries to survive in the growing market of communication and visual communication in the future. To form this future it is necessary to realise the change of paradigms in society as well as to find new humanised approaches to technology."

Alfred Rotert, European Media Art Festival

"It is almost as if I am witnessing the demise of the Arts magazines in Britain."

Ian Mundwilyer, Research Publications

"Many of the museums in Texas read Variant... it is an important tool for informing spaces around the US about art activity in your region of the world. It is an invaluable resource for finding out about new artists and ideas and influences and which artists they invite to exhibit, perform and lecture. To withdraw funding from such an important information source is like cutting your head off while the body runs around in circles."

Daniel Plunkett, ND Magazine

"Given the financial strength of American film production and their influence in the publishing industry, it is unreasonable to assume that independent magazines could finance themselves on the free market. To the contrary: only because the promotion and discussion of European films in magazines like *Variant* is notoriously underfunded and underestimated—thus making efficient work difficult—many "European" films do not get the attention they deserve. On the other hand, the success of "American" films is often not based on their superior quality but on well-equipped and financed promotional organisations and a critical establishment which can afford to actually write and think about films rather than spending most of their energies on financial questions. The appalling situation of independent European film is a result of a political and socio-cultural attitude which considers every non-American production to be some sort of difficult subtitled art movie. Watching film has become a crucial social ability, a new kind of cultural literacy needing to be developed and supported by professionals. I cannot believe that Scottish authorities have no interest in cultivating a Scottish view on cinematography and film journalism."

Reinhard Puntigam, Blimp Film Magazine

"As an arts administrator yourself, you will be aware of the current trend towards cross-artform interaction and collaboration, and that the creative potential of such a trend depends absolutely on the awareness of the artists themselves of activities not only within but also around their own discipline. It is my opinion, speaking as a composer and performer, that the coverage of a wide variety of activity in such a journal as *Variant* takes an essential part in this process of fostering a more open attitude towards what artists in the various disciplines are doing and perhaps might do next."

Richard Barrett

"I'm not sure that any comments from me would actually help *Variant*—but it seems like a recurring nightmare. To lose one magazine could be called unfortunate, to lose two... Publications cost money. Either you want to support them or you don't. The message from SAC is that it doesn't.

Any discussion in SAC about supporting criticism and discussion should have happened before delivering what could be the coup-de-grace to *Variant*. To timetable it for later this year seems at best like a policy which is trying to catch up with events."

Hilary Robinson, University of Ulster

"Perhaps the most important thing to say is that the Committee was not 'against' *Variant*. The problem was whether they could continue to offer support, in relation to other priorities. Without going into detail about all the funding decisions it is not possible to completely explain the decision... Taking up your final point, I am not sure personally whether what we want is a glossy magazine which only reaches a very small number of people. If magazines are about encouraging debate perhaps they have to aim to attract a broader visual arts readership than *Variant* aimed to attract, given its very specific editorial policy."

Andrew Nairne, in reply to the above

"I was really very shocked by the withdrawal from *Variant*. You know what a fine publication I've always considered it, way way above some of its English and European counterparts in its scope and the quality of writing and philosophy."

Neil Wallace, Programme Director, Tramway

"As a director of an international experimental and innovative Film and Video festival I am daily confronted with this stupid kind of commercial thinking and it needs a lot of time to convince foundation members and sponsors that it is very important to support innovative and high-quality cultural projects apart from the mainstream entertaining culture."

Dr. Christoph Settele, Viper, Switzerland

"*Variant* represents an aspect of cultural experience which is non-definitive, an open form, where terms like, radical, visionary, self-determination, seem to be very much less a thing of the past than they do when one is confronted with the general depression and neurosis of everyday."

Cathy Wilkes

"Many people would agree that one important aspect of a magazine is to serve as a promotional tool for the arts within the region it is based. At a future date, when considering how the gap left by the inevitable demise of *Variant* is to be filled, the SAC should not presume that a magazine can be nurtured into existence by simply making money available. The quick demise of the relaunched *Alba* and the failure of *Hybrid* illustrate the folly of this approach.

Short run Art magazines emerge from, and are supported by a constituency. These are the publications funders have the duty to support."

Ken Gill

"It would appear that for a small increase in funding, a vital publication would have been secured that would continue to champion issues of arts development and access. It is curious therefore, that issues of ACCESS and DEVELOPMENT are highlighted in your 'charter for the Arts' policy document...

In Scotland, art institutions are not exactly models of accessibility... Increasingly, the arts are being dictated to by a select few. This is a state of affairs that would seem to contradict the SAC's strategies of Access and development. And yet, through the decision to withdraw funding, you have denied opportunity and restricted access to the arts... *Variant* reflected my, and many other people's aspirations and hopes for the development of a new arts activity which is grounded in community practice, rather than in the sales rooms and commercial galleries."

Adam Geary

"Committee's decision in relation to *Variant* does not imply a lack of support or interest in encouraging critical debate. However substantial future support for a Scottish based visual arts magazine is unlikely unless it clearly addresses issues and events central to the making, curating and appreciation of contemporary art made or presented in Scotland. The question of art magazines is moreover part of a wider debate about fostering intelligent criticism and discussion, documenting exhibitions and projects, and encouraging both within Scotland and abroad an increasing interest in the work of artists living in Scotland. The Visual Arts Committee will be discussing this subject in detail later in the year."

Seona Reid, in response to the above

"Some two years ago I was approached by the ACGB and asked to submit a proposal for a London-based live-arts magazine. The panel specifically mentioned that they enviously took *Variant* for their model: Had the unwieldy machinery by which ACGB and SAC communicate allowed it, I suspect they would simply have put more money into *Variant*. My study for this proposal suggested such a magazine was uneconomic, and it comes as no surprise to me to hear that *Hybrid*, the eventual outcome of ACGB's plans, is now rumoured to be rapidly sinking into debt. However, for a magazine to fail in today's market is not a matter of blame or surprise. What is surprising, and worthy of blame, is that bodies such as the SAC are apparently incapable of recognising that they have before their eyes a flagship which has earned the respect of both the most extreme of art-loathing anarchists and the trendiest of ICA curators—and all in between.

It is incomprehensible to a person such as myself that you should now seek to undo the fine work in which you have had so integral a role: it argues some sudden thick darkness of mind on the part of SAC, indicative to outsiders of a demoralised and gutless institution that is losing its sense of direction and purpose."

Dr. Edmund Baxter

"The SAC may be there to promote what it sees as mainstream culture, that is bringing things in from outside, but it is also there to sustain and develop indigenous talent and culture. You cannot force local culture to be something it is not."

Fiona Byrne-Sutton

"Your stated grounds for not extending *Variant*'s funding beyond its initial three years was that it was 'unable to produce quarterly issues without significant increase in support'. I would not seek to question the details of your other funding decisions, although I note that no other revenue client has effectively been abolished by you in this funding round.

Instead, I would like to question your strategy. The visual arts, like any other area of the arts, does not survive and grow by art works alone. It needs an infrastructure, a vital part of which is one or more intelligent and critical magazines which make connections between different works and different fields. The benefits of such a magazine, as with all infrastructure, are difficult to trace in detail, especially in the short term. But it is the job of an arts strategy to address such infrastructural needs."

Nick Couldry

"I appreciate and note your comments about the need for magazines which make connections. However, the committee's view was that in reading the magazine, because of the specialist nature of most articles, it was actually very difficult to make meaningful connections. The committee does not believe *Variant* to be a primary part of the infrastructure of the dynamic visual arts constituency in Scotland."

Andrew Nairne, in response to the above

"Most people in Scotland, and outwith, are aware that the city of Glasgow is burgeoning with activity, and recognition has not been slow to come. This recognition, as I see it, is based upon the fact that Scotland supports a broad practice within its art community; and that Broad practice is made up of small pockets of intense discussion and application... On the issue of a profile for Scottish art/ideas within the international context: as a younger artist I had to make a decision as to the prospects for a fruitful practise based in Scotland. I, and many others, decided that it was worthwhile to remain, or return to, this country as opposed to any other. It is honest for me to say that this decision was encouraged by several individuals, institutions and publications, if not by word of mouth, then in commanding respect for the activities in which they were engaged. Malcolm Dickson and *Variant* magazine were key elements, among others. The implications of the SAC's decision on *Variant* does nothing to encourage me for the future."

Douglas Gordon

"Having sat for 3 years on the Arts Council of Great Britain's Art Advisory Committee, and an ACGB magazine review panel... I see no reason to compel a magazine to quarterly deadlines for bureaucratic convenience."

Anna Harding

"The health of the cultural situation in this country has depended on the commitment of groups and individuals who... have a remit based not on personal gain but on ensuring the continuation of a healthy growth. It is extremely disheartening to see this commitment so cruelly ignored. That the Council does not acknowledge how their decision will adversely affect the kind of new initiatives required to sustain the vitality of the arts in Scotland is baffling."

Christine Borland

The Palingenesis of the avant-garde

"Revolution must not only engender another conception of time, but must also assimilate it to a new synthesis of space. Both will be created simultaneously as they emerge out of the new relationship between human beings and nature; reconciliation."

Jacques Camatte Against Domestication

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS with recent academic critiques of the avant-garde is the way in which 'anti-art' has been conceptualised as privileging space over time. As a consequence, there has been little interest in viewing the avant-garde teleologically. Peter Burger in *Theory of the Avant-garde* (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1984) tends to interpret the avant-garde through the prism of Dada and surrealism. A correction to this tendency begins to emerge in such works as Andrew Hewitt's *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford University Press, California 1993), a work that focuses on Futurism. However, while this move 'backwards' in 'time' is most welcome, academic theorising about the avant-garde has yet to get to grips with post-war phenomena such as Lettrism and Situationism.

What can most usefully be lifted from Burger is the notion of the avant-garde as an attack on the institution of art, which emerges in opposition to the absurd assumption that Dada and Surrealism were merely an attempt to supersede the dominant artistic styles of their epoch. With regard to the author of *Theory Of The Avant-Garde* and his collaborator in criticism Christa Burger, Hewitt problematises the idea of the autonomy of art that they took up from the Frankfurt School. The following passage from *Fascist Modernism* (page 59) is typical of Hewitt's polemic: "If capitalism provides the material preconditions for autonomous art, then it is the philosophical tradition of German Idealism that provides its ideological legitimation. At the end of the eighteenth century the emerging literature is assigned a place within a discursive hierarchy regulated by the philosophy of Idealism. Thus, while art might be said to resist at the level of content capitalism's tendency toward economic rationalisation, it can do so only within a prerationalised set of philosophical relationships. Contrary to its ideological status in the nineteenth century as an escape from ubiquitous social forces of rationalisation, autonomous art is also a product of those forces."

It has long been a banality among 'radical economists' that choice within the 'free market system' is already and always ideological; that rather than being 'value free,' choice (which is inevitably preconditioned)

is an arbitrary a priori value. The 'free market' has never existed, it is a utopian construct designed to mask the 'social' forces that actually shape the economy. Historically, as 'the arts' are liberated from the shackles of the patronage system and thereby become 'Art' in its modern sense, precisely at that moment when the commodification of culture brings about the possibility of its ideological 'autonomy,' the institution of art emerges to regulate the cultural field. It follows from this that in attacking the institution of art, the avant-garde ought to develop a critique of commodity relations. The failure of the classical avant-garde, and I would subsume the Situationist International within this category, is its failure to make this leap to an issue that lies at the heart of Marxist economics. This failure arises from a desire on the part of the classical avant-garde to integrate art and life. The classical avant-garde is utopian precisely because it wants to deregulate art; but this literal/metaphorical acceptance of the absurd claims made by Capital's ideological apologists (who necessarily propagate theories which imply that art does, or at least can, exist in the 'beyond' as a secular religion that 'transcends' commodity relations) is not without certain merits, because ultimately it brings those operating within the institution of art into conflict with the very forces that legitimate 'artistic' activity.

It is within the parameters of such a discourse that we must situate the 'praxis' of the Situationist International. Guy Debord states in theses 191 of *Society Of Spectacle* (Black & Red, Detroit 1970, revised 1977) that: "Dadaism and Surrealism are two currents which mark the end of modern art. They are contemporaries, though only in a relatively conscious matter, of the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of this movement, which left them imprisoned in the same artistic field whose decrepitude they had announced, is the basic reason for their immobilisation. Dadaism and Surrealism are at once historically related and opposed to each other. This opposition, which each of them considered to be its most important and radical contribution, reveals the internal inadequacy of their critique, which each developed one-sidedly. Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realising it; Surrealism wanted to realise art without suppressing it. The critical position later elaborated by the Situationists has shown that the suppression and the realisation of art are inseparable aspects of a single supersession of art"

Debord, whose 'anti-career' began with a full-length

feature film *Howlings In Favour Of de Sade* which contained no images, just black film stock interspersed with bursts of white light, was incapable of stepping outside the frame of reference provided by the institution of art, and instead theorised his way back to a one-sided understanding of Hegel. It is perfectly clear from both *The Philosophical Propaedeutic* ('The Science of the Concept', Third Section, *The Pure Exhibition of Spirit* theses 203 to 207) and the *Philosophy of Mind: Being*, Part Three of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Section Three—*Absolute Mind* theses 553 to 571) that within the Hegelian system the supersession of art is in fact found in revealed religion.

Since among the more advanced sections of the 'bourgeoisie,' 'art' had by Debord's day come to replace revealed religion, the Situationists were forced to skip this particular Hegelian inversion, and instead jump forward to philosophy which represents the highest achievement of 'absolute mind' in Hegel's system. In line with the young Marx, Debord viewed the proletariat as the subject that would realise philosophy. The Situationist conception of the supersession of art is also filtered through the ideas of August von Cieszkowski, whose 1838 tome *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* was dedicated to the notion that "the deed and social activity will now overcome (supersede) philosophy." It was this source that provided the Situationists with the material to complete their false 'sublation,' allowing them to arrive back at the final category of romantic art within the Hegelian system, that is to say poetry.

Raoul Vaneigem states in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Rebel Press and Left Bank Books, London and Seattle 1983, page 153) that: "Poetry is... 'making,' but 'making' restored to the purity of its moment of genesis—seen, in other words, from the point of view of the totality." In the sixties, Debord and Vaneigem claimed that they'd superseded the avant-garde and were consequently 'making' a 'revolutionary' situation that went beyond the point of no return. However, all the Situationists actually succeeded in doing was restating the failures of Dada and Surrealism in Hegelian terminology, with the inevitable consequence that their critique was in many ways much less 'advanced' than that of their 'precursors.' Debord, who was a better theorist than his 'comrade' Vaneigem, appeared to be aware of this slippage although he did not know how to 'overcome' it, and the fragment of von Cieszkowski cited in the celluloid version of



Society Of The Spectacle (an English translation of the script can be found in *Society Of The Spectacle And Other Films*, Rebel Press, London 1992, page 71) is most telling: "Therefore, after the direct practice of art has ceased to be the most distinguished thing, and this predicate has been devolved onto theory, such as it is, it detaches itself presently from the latter, in so far as a synthetic post-theoretical practice is formed, which has as its primary goal to be the foundation and the truth of art as a philosophy."

Hewitt states in *Fascist Modernism* (page 85) that "History, to the artists of the avant-garde, is available as commodity; and the commodity, in turn, is intrinsically 'historical,' second-hand. Perhaps, after all, the avant-garde does develop a style, one of bricolage, in which the commodification of history and the historicization of the commodity (that is, aestheticization and politicisation respectively) converge." I agree with Peter Burger when he suggests in *Theory Of The Avant-Garde* that the failure of the Dadaist and Surrealist assault on the institution of art led to a widening of the definition of what is acceptable as art. This was a double edged 'failure,' arising as it did from the desire of the classical avant-garde to integrate 'art' and life, because as Hewitt implies, it leads to the history of art becoming available to the artist as a commodity. However, since the ideological 'autonomy' of art is grounded in its status as a commodity with a market value regulated by the institution of art, it must inevitably be protected as a piece of 'intellectual property' against its free use as a piece of bricolage in later works of art.

It comes as no surprise that as early as 1959, the Situationist Guy Debord had to rework his film *On The Passage Of A Few Persons Through A Rather Brief Period Of Time* because he was unable to buy the rights to many of the scenes he wished to re-use from Hollywood 'classics.' Debord's constant recourse to cliché is undoubtedly self-conscious and iconoclastic, so perhaps it is not ironic that his 'wholly new type of film' should sit very easily within one of the most despised cinematic genres of the post-war period, that of the mondo movie. Nevertheless, Debord was much more than simply a plagiarist, when his output is viewed from the perspective of avant-garde film-making, it appears highly innovative.

Once the practice of appropriation became widespread within the field of art, that is to say within that field of cultural practices regulated by the institution of art, then art as a discourse had reached its historical limits. These contradictions cannot be resolved within the discourse of art; within this discursive field it is not possible to advance beyond the solution offered by Hegel for whom "plagiarism would have to be a matter of honour and held in check by honour" (*Philosophy Of Right*, thesis 69). In other words, while copyright laws remain in force, appropriation as an 'artistic' practice will continue to be dealt with by the legal system on a case by case basis. From my perspective, all that remains to be done is for the contemporary avant-garde to broaden its intransigent critique of the institution of art, while simultaneously offering a lead to all those who would step outside art as a frame of reference. This is not so much a case of 'overcoming' art as abandoning it; such a strategy was implicit in the activities of Henry Flynt, an individual active on the fringes of Fluxus who as long ago as 1962 gave up

art in favour of a subjective modality which he named 'brend.' The avant-garde is viewed as a nuisance by those who are happy with the world as it is. Art is a secular religion that provides a 'universal' justification for social stratification, it furnishes the ruling class with the social glue of a common culture, while simultaneously excluding the vast mass of men and wimmin from participation in this 'higher' realm.

The work of art is never a simple entity, a 'thing in itself,' but is literally produced by those sets of social and institutional relationships that simultaneously legitimate it. While the contemporary avant-garde shares its precursor's desire to attack the institution of art, it also differs fundamentally from its classic predecessor. If Futurism, Dada and Surrealism wanted to integrate art and life, today's avant-garde wants to consign the former category to oblivion. This is the return at a higher level of Islamic-cum-Protestant iconoclasm. While the classical avant-garde was ultimately Deist in its attitude towards art, its progeny has taken up a stance of intransigent atheism in its antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture.

The institution of art long ago adopted the ironic pose of post-modernism, which is why the contemporary avant-garde denigrates space in favour of time. To be avant-garde is to be ahead of the pack and this inevitably entails a 'teleological' conception of history. The avant-garde uses the 'myth of progress' in a manner analogous to George Sorel's conception of the 'General Strike'. The avant-garde does not believe in 'absolute' progress. Progress is simply a means of organising the present, it is a 'heuristic' device. In its 'affirmative' guises, 'progress' is an empty conception that offers men and wimmin the illusory compensation of future revenge for the humiliations they suffer in daily life. A mythic conception of progress moves wo/men to action, it is the means by which they can organise the transformation of geographical 'space'. This transformation will entail a complete break with the ideological trappings that have been familiar to us since the enlightenment. Just as the Christian religion ceased to be a vehicle for social contestation in the eighteenth-century, the political party as an engine of social change is now utterly exhausted. The future of mass struggle lies in what were until very recently viewed as 'fringe' phenomena, that is to say new social movements with an absurdly faked antiquity; the ever growing band of 'Druid' Councils offer an excellent example of this type of organisation.

My mythic notion of progress would be an anathema to the classical avant-gardists of the Situationist International. However, while I agree with Kant that 'culture' must be brought before the judgement of tradition, the founding father of transcendental idealism failed to ask by what tradition is any particular theory or cultural artefact to be judged? The contemporary avant-garde insists that the only tradition by which anything can be judged is one that does not yet exist, in other words, the culture we are elaborating in our theory and practice. Fluxus was not a 'genuine' avant-garde, it was simply a womb out of which intransigents capable of superseding the Situationist International have subsequently emerged. If various young adults are currently experimenting with Fluxus-style assemblages, multiples and mailings, this is a perfectly healthy first step towards avant-garde iconoclasm. To borrow Wittgenstein's metaphor, Fluxus is a

ladder with which youth can climb above the world as it is, and then proceed to throw Fluxus away.

While Debord and his comrades wanted to supersede art with the 'highest' achievements of 'absolute mind,' that is to say philosophy, recent theorising about the avant-garde can be read as an attempt to transform culture into a religion of the most 'primitive' type, that of the 'divine King' or a vegetation cult. Paul Mann in *The Theory-Death Of The Avant-Garde* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1991) states that: "Death is necessary so that everything can be repeated and the obituary is a way to deny that death ever occurred. Under the cover of the obituary artists and critics continue exactly as before, endlessly recuperating differential forms, endlessly manufacturing shabbier and shabbier critical goods... The death of the avant-garde is old news, already finished, no longer worth discussing; but those who think so have not yet even begun to think it. There is no post: everything that claims to be so blindly repeats what it thinks it has left behind. Only those willing to remain in the death of the avant-garde, those who cease trying to drown out death's silence with the noise of neocritical production, will ever have a hope of hearing what that death articulates."

The task of the avant-garde then, is to carry on as before by providing those still trapped within the old modes of discourse with a myth that will deconstruct itself. What is as yet particular must become general, that is to say we require the social construction of a new 'subjectivity' so that, once belief is recognised as 'our enemy,' it becomes possible for 'everybody' to step outside the frames of reference provided by art, religion and philosophy. This must necessarily take the form of what the discredited 'culture' views as a fraud and a sham. Rather than attempting to 'resolve' contradictions, the 'avant-garde' puts them to 'work' as the engine of an as yet unknown 'disorder.'

Stewart Home



images: EUAN SUTHERLAND

No-one ever suddenly became depraved

“There are many invisible circumstances, which whether we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtue, are more important than publick occurrences.”

Boswell's Life of Johnson



image: ANNE ELLIOT

THE TACTLESS, prurient glare which has so cruelly been cast upon Julian Spalding, Glasgow's Director of Museums, has blinded us to the proper distinction of "publick occurrences" and "invisible circumstances." This not only discourages virtuous enquirers and fails to increase their moral knowledge, but engineers a field-day for muckraking and effrontery, which has occupied the confusion purely to generate scandal where none exists.

While infantile and repetitive slander may entertain the jaded palate, it has sufficiently wearied the unbiased yet silent majority, that an unvoiced desire is almost palpable in the atmosphere of Glasgow, which calls out for the exposure of the hienious nature of the lies and conspiracy theories which have so distorted and poisoned our appreciation of one of the city's most forthright and dedicated public servants.

Firstly there is the pernicious myth that prior to coming to Glasgow, Julian sacked Terry McCarthy and the entire staff of the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) in Manchester. Nothing could be further from the truth. The NMLH moved from London to Manchester and, following common practice, quite naturally left a lot of its staff behind. Julian's role was in a purely advisory capacity in its reorganisation; and in any case, McCarthy (an old fashioned Socialist) had held his position for 13 years and surely fresh blood was needed. Ask yourself this: would Julian have been a successful candidate for the position of Director of Museums, in the eyes of a Labour Council and NALGO, if he had a track record of ruinous spiteful vendettas against

anyone with a left-wing outlook on social history? Of course not! The utter folly inherent in this assertion is revealed by the misapprehension that he was brought to Glasgow expressly for this purpose by the now Lord Provost, Patrick Lally. This is not the case. He was head hunted by someone else. Their inspired choice is vindicated by the fact that nobody can now remember who he replaced, Alisdair Auld, who was approaching pensionable age. Also, think of the other applicants for the post: Roger Billcliffe, Christopher Carrell and

Elspeth King. With all due respect, would they have brought such verve, flair and media attention to the job? Perhaps, but only perhaps.

Wearily, we turn now to the so-called Elspeth King Affair, which with all its attendant hysteria, saw her demonize Julian in a vicious attempt to hound him out of office. The facts of the matter are as follows. Julian freely offered King (a Communist) the position of Temporary Keeper grade and a golden opportunity to manage 1990's flagship exhibition, upon which rested all the hopes for the new Glasgow. Her disgraceful response described *The Words and the Stones* (TWATS), in a letter of 28/8/89 as follows: "You perhaps do not know how poisonous the cup is. Most people in the West of Scotland who have the option are not co-operating with this project... To turn this situation around will require... the risk of my own reputation and personal integrity." What was the price of her involvement? "The least I require in return," she wrote, "is a recognition of departmental status for social history, my immediate appointment as keeper and Michael Donnelly's appointment as depute keeper." How could Julian be expected to strike such a Faustian bargain with someone willing to compromise her reputation and integrity so wantonly. How could he reconcile this with his position as one of the Council's department heads on the exhibition's board safeguarding the city's investment? King then foisted on him a list of 24 questions about TWATS, riddled with unnecessary and niggling jibes, which impugned the financial management and political direction of the exhibition and thus the entire city. All that really happened was that a small group of professional cynics then aimed to try to link these events to King's eventual resignation, ignoring that this occurred a full year later, and that she resigned of her own volition. The exhibition, renamed Glasgow's Glasgow, had by then become an unqualified success, bringing £4.3m of inward investment to the city and vanquishing forever the city's poor public image of poverty, violence, housing schemes, political dissent and general unpleasantness which had perverted Glasgow into the linchpin of perfidious Albion.

We were later to witness numerous petty reruns of attacks on Julian's professionalism, particularly with the "Glasgow Girls" exhibition, where he was falsely accused of "ousting" Jude Burkhauser (an American) and muscling in on "her" exhibition. Critics here ignore the fact that she had only performed some minor research on the exhibition, attenuated as it was over three years, and that again Julian's role was only in an avuncular advisory capacity. This is typical of how aspects of his private life and personal dealings, which have no right to be in the public gaze, and should have been kept invisible, are outrageously invaded. Even the happiest day of his life, his wedding, was brutally intruded upon, with wildly unfounded allegations that he had failed to pay for the hire of the Kelvingrove Museum for his wedding reception, surfacing during his honeymoon. This is nothing short of

vile persecution. These unfounded, often sexist, allegations (nothing has ever been proven in a Court of Law) persist with all the characteristic regularity typical of a smear campaign.

Perhaps the most vicious calumny attached to him, is that he has subsumed the identity of individual Galleries into an overriding corporate identity and censors any dissent by employees. This is simply a demonstration of the ignorance of his detractors of his efforts to develop a more democratic form of management. Indeed, in the Kelvingrove Museum, junior members of staff are actively encouraged to criticise the displays of their departmental heads and challenge them for the right to replace their exhibits. The cheerful morale of the Museum's staff and its open working practices were themselves on display for all to see in the programme, "Dinosaurs and Sacred Cows," produced by Julian with assistance from Ishbell McLean. As for censorship, during 1990 more comment was made on culture in the Glasgow Herald than on the Poll Tax, a great deal of which either concerned Julian directly or had his sanction. Neil Wallace, Mark O'Neil and others all spoke out frequently to silence the critics and artists on the loony left who were becoming an embarrassment to the City and its clients.

A champion of respectable good taste—perhaps he is a Museum Director's Museum Director. He has not made a mockery out of the new Museum of Modern Art by including what small factions within the reactionary establishment impose on us as contemporary art; but what is in reality the connivance of inflated personal ego and whim, vested interest and the ugly, hidden, dangerous agendas of wierd secret cabals. His stalwart critique of the excesses of modern art and its petulant inability to face criticism, was in evidence from the start of his tenure, some 7 years ago, with his denouncement of the British Art Show, and his organisation of the Great British Art Show as a replacement. Here we saw the roots of his radical ethos, which seeks to put the interests of the paying public first: and is fully cognizant that they require a simple clarifying vision to steer them through the maze and obfuscations of 'conceptualism' and 'ideas.' The four new galleries in the new Museum are mercifully free of concepts. That one lone, and now sadly isolated figure, can achieve as much as Julian Spalding in so short a time, is a testament to the openness and opportunity that his enlightened dictatorship has brought to Glasgow, and which he has single-handedly striven to protect for those few loyal individuals who deserve it.

Caught in the Web

Only a few short years ago, the birth of the World Wide Web greatly extended the capabilities of the Internet by allowing pages of text and images to be created and transmitted in a simple way. As with previous technological developments such as the cassette tape, people soon harnessed this to create their own magazines. Until last year, the expense of space on the rapidly evolving web placed it beyond the reach of independent projects, other than those within universities. However, by last summer, competition between service providers brought a position where anyone with an Internet account could get web-space and set up some pages.

One of the first UK arts projects to have a web presence was the Manchester-based Index group, whose pages document the group's 7 years of performance and video installations. These well-assembled pages feature the artists' statements plus small (and hence quick to obtain) photographs of each event.

In autumn 1995, the Society of Scottish Artists obtained web space through Cyberia Cafe. Artists participating in their annual exhibition were able to place a photograph of their work in a virtual display over the following year. This is very much an on-line catalogue, which lists works by category and enables the viewer to see small images of any individual's works and then obtain a closer view if they wish.

Around the same time, the Stirling Marginal Review was created. The original intention was to use text-based pages to meet the real need for critical discussion in the Forth Valley area, where projects are rarely covered by the Glasgow and Edinburgh based "national" media. Locally, 1995 had also brought intense discussion around issues of the urban environment and public art in Stirling. These too could have benefited from a forum for debate.

However, after a short time the Stirling Marginal Review pages began to develop towards being a site for arts projects. These have rapidly changed from mere documentation of works to a more complex situation. Sometimes the web pages complement the work: for example the critique of Scottish primary schooling in Karen Strang's *Ricky 1963: Wound Strap Watch Table*. Alternatively, the web pages can be the only realisation of the work; an example of this is the Hanging Together group-work *X-Site*, which was prevented from achieving real existence by logistical difficulties.

This changing focus is in line with developments elsewhere. A couple of notable recent web-works have been the *Hypertext Journal* by Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie, texts and images gathering around a journey to the Scottish islands, and Simon Yuill's *Alma Mountain Review*. He is also involved in *elevator*: a Dundee-based web-zine which is experimenting with collaborative works in images, real-time discussion and video work.

As I've noted, web projects fulfil a variety of functions. Starting from the secondary function of documenting past and present real-life projects, there is the movement towards the web pages being integral to

ongoing projects, or even becoming the sole manifestation of the project. And, importantly, there is a push towards collaboration, where boundaries, whether of geography or specialisation, can be breached. The original purpose of the web was, after all, to link diverse parts of a project. So, for example, some people involved in Index will create a 24 hour web piece for World Aids Day in conjunction with others in Australia, Hungary and Canada.

Other groupings are now taking their first steps towards a web presence: for example Locus + in Newcastle. Again, these are starting as documentation sites but, in time, the web aspect may become more integral to their activities.

The number of people who have looked at all these sets of pages remains relatively low—far lower than, say, a Star Trek fan page. However, what has motivated people to become involved is probably a combination of curiosity to explore a new medium, with a desire to make something different in the short period before the net becomes dominated by "official" pages.

Paradoxically, some seem to long for the bonds of official involvement, for the arts agencies to become involved. Echoing the pursuit of grants for status more than monetary value, such a desire takes managerial quality control at its face value—the good faith that selection and presentation by an agency do indeed "separate the wheat from the chaff". This reinstates the very hierarchy of managers and clients which can be side-stepped by autonomous projects.

In the case of the web, and the net in general, the institutions can provide very little which isn't better done for yourself. It is quick and easy to learn how to create web pages, and the medium has none of the distribution problems of conventional zines or cassettes: once the pages of a project are available on a directory like

<http://www.altavista.digital.com>

it is accessible to any enquirer anywhere.

Where official pages have been set up, such as the new British Council/ Scottish Arts Council pages at <http://www.scotarts.org.uk>

these don't go beyond providing a Scotland-wide institutional phonebook, with each page a destination rather than a node. This may have its uses, but it is unlikely that they could, or would want to, move towards collaborative projects.

Another aspect of concern to some is the copyright issue. Artists' concern to obtain recompense for their works has led them to support the copyright laws. This is despite these laws having been introduced to protect middlemen like publishers rather than originators. There is no getting away from the fact that a work made public on the web is one which can be loaded onto anyone's computer, for as short or long a time as they see fit. Indeed, some web arts projects are constructed around repeated adjustments to an image by many people. If one wants to retain control over an image, then web pages (like any form of publication) should be avoided. But if one seeks collaborators to

develop a theme, then the web opens possibilities which transcend the limitations of geography and commercial distribution.

In a feature on Radio Scotland's *The Slice* in May, artist Karen Strang summarised this viewpoint: "The great thing about Internet web sites is that anyone can have a go... I'm anti-copyright, anti-censorship. This is the last bastion of free speech".

The copyright problem affects far more than just artists. In his article "The Economy of Ideas" John Perry Barlow tries to bypass the current wrangles over intellectual property by looking forward to a future whose economy is "based on relationship rather than possession... a world made more of verbs than nouns". Whatever the hyperbole, and the suspicion that this attitude fits the interests of a stratum whose careers allow them to avoid attachment to any one place, that does seem to be an interesting possibility. If the web can provide an opportunity to assemble networks from

Many of these pages are accessible at :

<http://www.almac.co.uk/personal/adickson/index.htm>

Others can be found easily using the Alta Vista search tool.

diverse projects each rooted in its own particular location, perhaps we can re-place ourselves in a way that bureaucratic plurality cannot.

A. Dickson

Focail láidire, i nglór íseal

WITHIN THE SPACE of the last year there has been a surge in the construction and shop fitting of strongly advertising, self proclaiming Irish bars in Glasgow. At least seven such new pubs/bars have opened, staking claims to a notion of authentic Irishness. There is no one focus of location for the new premises though they are predominantly concentrated within Glasgow's city centre. This phenomena of the escalation of proclaimed *Real Irish* pubs is not one isolated to Glasgow, it is inextricably linked to a snowballing UK wide product push.

The designs of the new pubs are based on the pursuit of an idealised small *country pub* feel. Various attempts are made to give these larger spaces a sense of intimacy through the use of partitions, screens and the reintroduction of snugs. As much as the theme of Irishness retains a stressed similarity, the specifics of the themes differ and the varied geometries of the buildings dictate their own particular layouts and features. The allusion to Irishness is also played out in a variety of fashions, from the use of 'olde worlde' shop interiors to the inclusion of museum vitrines displaying ambiguous artefacts. In common with most idyllic country pub themes, wooden panelling features heavily and object d'art hide the harsh corners and empty ceiling spaces, all of which in the setting signify little other than an attempt at a throwback to a vague rural past using clichéd terms of nostalgia and romanticism. The reading of the pub's contents are more specifically placed with the use of the Gaelic language in signage. Distressed, supposedly aged, clichéd wooden signs, prints and enamel plaques, either referencing or actual reproductions of graphic styles of previous advertising, seek to re-affirm the heritage of the establishment and the products on sale, all with the appearance of having come off the production line the week before. Still more direct associations are made to an Irishness and a sense of place through the greater proliferation of the media advertising of the products on sale. Despite the otherwise seemingly nonsensical and taboo activity of drinking in a would be Oifig An Phoist or hardware store, the flimsy plywood cornices with shamrock patterns drilled in them and the deliberately chipped,

newly stained woodwork, exposing the fresh pine underneath, only add to the feeling of being on a stage set surrounded by props. The general ephemera, the rush and tack of the decoration and building work adds to this disingenuous sentiment. I would have thought that there should be an obvious loss in the feeling of any implied authenticity alluded to in these places. The actuality is that the new pubs reside in a tradition of such thematising and are a well established part of our daily, *critically conscious* lives. The decor is familiar in the way that it shouts it's a themed pub, and not the first or last in a long line of thematising.

Questions arise about our desire for, or assumptions about, an authentic reality; how and where they are informed. I am not making a claim for an authentic National identity but I am questioning the effects of these selective re-constructions of *Irishness*. The claim to an authenticity and the constant need for new sights and sounds that must still convey a sense of familiarity, a feeling of homeliness and the reassuring associations to that much beloved *corner shop* workplace. What we are presented with is a would be 'microcosm' of Ireland, a public relations packaged image that has turned into a predictable but successful formula for an audience that wishes to be reassured. These theme parks present a populist notion of an Irish cultural Disney Land and in doing so suggest a kind of homogeneity of style and content. They speak reassuringly with one clear voice which on the other hand is also dispiriting.

These pubs do not exist simply in themselves but are steeped in the mass marketing of the companies products that they sell or are owned by. They are after all, both the outlets for, and the embodiment of, media constructs of identities and life styles familiar to the sale of any product, in this case part and parcel of the construction and consumption of an Irish identity that presents the male Irish immigrant as a unified category. There has been a general targeting of a younger market as well as an expansion of the product range. In much of the advertising we find the generic Irishman, redefined for mass consumption and obliging to a form of populism, an acceptable UK media face of Irishness, stereotypically the comedian, game show host, gambling rogue and light entertainer. In one TV advert the desire for escapism both to and from the excitement, hustle and bustle of an American bar is collided and contradicted with the nostalgia of an ideal rural bliss. Knowingly and openly tugging at the family heart strings, its references to the reality of economic migration are stirred only for effect. Similarly, in a now routine feature of avoidance of any possible links with Irish Nationalism, the rolling, pastoral landscape is presented in a way that deliberately effaces any contentious notion of land.

On the Irish landscape Irish artist Willie Doherty explains, "...the landscape is the site of disenfranchisement and privilege, of sorrow and anguish, of hate and guilt, and simultaneously of aspiration and hope. The role which place and landscape play in the psychologi-

cal battle of hearts and minds in the war in Ireland cannot be underestimated. If place is inextricably bound up with ideas of home and identity then it is at the very heart of the struggle between colonised and coloniser." (*Two Names...Two Places...Two Minds*, Camera Austria, No. 37, 1991)

Some of the very basic things that motivate us are advertising imagery, our very world is saturated in it. Advertisers pervade our being to affect our deepest impulses; to shape our sensibility; to transform and organise our vision; ultimately to affect our whole behaviour. In doing so they frame our notions of authenticity. Even if we believe we are not affected we do not exist in a vacuum. Our world is lived with others. What we have in these pubs is the re-construction of the re-construction of an Irishness, a lived reality of thematics operating at a level of fantasy. The copy has become the familiar in the consciousness of many, it has been reinvested with an authenticity through proliferation. It is value constructed numerically. Similar in ways to Coronation Street, perhaps once intended to reflect an essence of a Northern English life, a soap fitting for the time of social-realist documentary and film, finding its existence in the 90's a parody of its own constructions. Its reference points have become itself but for the viewing culture at large it has to be remembered that the TV is also a point of reference. It is not just a painted backdrop but an integral part within a diversity of representations, making claims towards or against the authentic problematic in themselves.

We should not necessarily presuppose that these pubs, and the media circus that surrounds them, are somehow representative of Ireland. What we are presented with is an Ireland constructed of 'other' acknowledged and assimilated words, functioning in a way intended to tickle our sensibilities and provide us with pleasurable sensations. This construct is fixed in a particular de-historicised provincialism, arrested from the world of politics. In these terms, a perpetuated, unified identity of Irishness is used as a convenient, and politically passive, organising principle for the circulation of consumer goods. Unfortunately, the raised profile of a product, along with an uncritical absorption of updated stereotyping terminology, doesn't amount to a raise in the profile of the different issues that affect a community or lead to an understanding of the complexities and diversities of experience within it.

One of the results of British colonialism has been the fragmentation of Irish people through a complex web of differences. While there is no homogenous representation of Irish immigration, Ireland's Diaspora has created a huge global network of people claiming to be of Irish origin. Irishness means different things in different places and develops characteristics particular to specific locales. The wider network of social practices within which identities are constituted must be explored within a discourse not only of emigration but also a complex diversity of assimilation.

Leigh French

image: LEIGH FRENCH



Club Adorno

Transcript of a roundtable discussion centring on dance music. Participating in the debate were **Tony Lamprey** (resident DJ at the House of Chords club in London, founder of the legendary *Sigh* night), **GX 303** (techno producer based in Middlesbrough, latest EP *Rubber Bullet* out soon) and **Theodor W. Adorno** (leading member of the Frankfurt School of social theory, his publications include *Negative Dialectics* and *The Jargon of Authenticity*). Discussion chaired by **Mandy Leatherall** (reader in sociology at the University of Guildford and experienced clubber).



image: SIMON PAYNE 'CLUB ADORNO'

Mandy Leatherall: Good evening. Before we begin I'd just like to thank our guests for their generous participation in what I'm sure will be a lively and provocative discussion. Particular thanks to you Theodor, as I think you must have had by far the longest journey to get here tonight. OK, so, if I can turn to you first Tony? What do you think has been the defining experience of the British house music scene?

Tony Lamprey: Well, for me there have been so many great clubbing experiences over the years but I suppose that if I had to pick out just one it has to be that feeling of freedom and elation that we first felt in Ibiza during the famous summer of '88. You know what I mean? Pure pleasure—you just can't get that anywhere else.

ML: Theodor, you've been working on critiques of pleasure and aesthetics since before the rest of us were born, in addition to having some famous experience of that first Summer of Love, 1968. What's your position on the Balearic pleasure aesthetic?

Theodor W. Adorno: Here the watchword is 'relax and take it easy', a formula borrowed from the language of the nursing home, not of exuberance. Happiness is obsolete; uneconomic.

TL: What? No. No. I think you're missing the point—it wasn't about making money, it was...

GX 303: Yeah! Yeah! The keyword being "wasn't". I know what the professor means. These housey housey characters are bleedin' morons. Corporate pop house producers making tunes for the under sixteens!

ML: Let's keep it intelligent please.

GX 303: That's what I'm saying to you. These millionaire hippies are an insult to the intelligence.

T.L.: Oh come on! Listen mate, we're all on the same side here you know.

GX 303: Don't fuckin' mate me! I know your type, one of these middleclass flyweights with sun and moon symbols all over your stripped pine scatter cushions.

ML: Any thoughts on that Theodor?

TWA: The tendency to occultism is a symbol of regression in consciousness. Monotheism is decomposing into a second mythology, 'I believe in astrology because I don't believe in God.'

GX 303: Right again Einstein! Fuckin' Notting Hill sun worshippers! Scum of the earth.

ML: Okay. Okay. Let's move on shall we to discuss the clubs that you DJ at. Tony, you tour the country playing to packed houses in Leeds, Manchester and Glasgow but you still turn up on your home turf every Friday. Is that important to you as an artist?

TL: Well, I've been resident at the House of Chords for over four years now and the amazing thing is that the vibe is still so strong after all that time. It just feeds back into the music and seeing all those familiar faces week after week really makes you want to turn on the style, you know.

ML: How would you answer those charges of elitism that some in the music press have levelled at you? After all, that strict door policy of yours is legendary.

TL: Yeah, but it's a necessary evil for any top club. I'm afraid you've got to be selective to keep the atmosphere.

TWA: Professional warmth, for the sake of profit, fabricates closeness and immediacy where people are worlds apart.

TL: Listen mate, there's nothing fake about our atmosphere. You should come down and check it out. Tell you what, why don't I put you on the guest list for 'Sigh' this Friday? If I put you down plus one you could bring a friend.

ML: It is a 'must go' night Theodor, I've been loads of times. Maybe you can take Max? Oh go on!

TWA: What a state the dominant consciousness must have reached, when the resolute proclamation of compulsive extravagance and champagne jollity, formerly reserved to attaches in Hungarian operettas, is elevated in deadly earnest to a maxim of right living.

ML: Look, I appreciate your conception of a fully commodified and administered leisure culture but surely there's room for selfish abandon, or losing control.

GX 303: I think she wants you to cheer up.

TWA: My friend, Schiller's dictum that 'Life is good in spite of it all', has become idiocy now that it is blown into the same trumpet as omnipresent advertising. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality.

GX 303: Well, there are chances to stick a spanner in the works, just use a bit of cunning my man.

TL: Why so negative all the time? Honestly, knocking success is like a plague in this country.

GX 303: (laughs) Sometimes it's necessary to squeeze something out of the mainstream, even if it's only money to finance the real tunes. Use a different name in a different style, or whatever takes yer fancy. Listen, are we done yet?

ML: Almost!

TWA: In the age of the individual's liquidation, the question of individuality must be raised anew. While the individual, like all individualistic processes of production, has fallen behind the state of technology and become historically obsolete, he becomes the custodian of truth, as the condemned against the victor. A pencil and rubber are of more use to thought than a battalion of assistants.

GX 303: Or as we say in the old school, a Stylophone is more useful than CD mixer. Thankyou and goodnight.

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image: GRAHAM RAMSAY 'JOHN SAXMAN COOKERY CLASS'

Getting carried away

YOBS, WEIRDOS AND WASTERS are leading art down some dingy streets. Styles of enjoyment that seem to have always been sneered at by wisdom are being shamelessly displayed by the emergent art. The question seems to be, are these artists, who are getting carried away with little pleasures, losing sight of more important matters? The answer I want to give is unambiguous, but difficult to support: you can take your aesthetic propriety and stick it up your arse.

Not all so-called 'young British art' is characterised by fickle, wanton, undisciplined enjoyment. Some is. But what's more important is that this art of high-spiritedness and low tastes has turned its back on aesthetic and saintly visions of spiritual sublimation, of noble pleasures and purified souls. This is to be seen not only in the spectacularly puerile mannequins of the Chapman brothers and the adolescent fanaticism of Jeremy Deller's Madchester idolatry. Georgina Starr's cultural trashiness and Keith Tyson's incontinent absurdity are no less insubordinate to wisdom's ordering of pleasure, though they are much less conspicuously philistine.

Cheap thrills and cheap tricks, dirty words and daft ideas: the lover of wisdom would find the lowest of indulgences in the emergent art. Adam Chodzko getting off his face in the forest, or sending stuff in to contact mags; Bank's all-knowing curatorial irresponsibility; the Wilson twins' acid trip images; and, David Burrow's fist-fights between Britpopsters and Enlightenment thinkers - these are the works of vandals, numskulls and the easily led. Unless, that is, they are the works of those who can't take seriously the age-old eulogies of art and refined thought. There's no better example of this than Rebecca Warren's video of her own chirpy face being splattered with punk - a piece which has an astonishing disregard for 'the beautiful', preferring the ugly, hateful and ludicrous. It's as if the art of the last couple of years has finally come to terms with the aesthetics of fat Elvis.

If aesthetic pleasure is satisfied with beauty then an Elvis pictography would be an aesthetic nightmare of waste, decay, loss, destruction, and weakness. Young Elvis was beautiful. And when his body got carried away with the music, the world swooned. But when Elvis got carried away with burgers and drugs his body left his control then collapsed. But isn't this picture of decadent tragedy a severe assault on voluptuous thrills in the name of exalted pleasure? And wouldn't the Elvis story begin to look very different if aesthetics could learn to love the passion and madness of falling, losing your head, getting fucked? Yes, fat Elvis deserves to be the patron saint of mad fuckers, layabouts and chemically aided hedonists, because these are the lovers of a graceless, insubordinate aesthetics.

Pleasure for the wise, on the other hand, must be ultimately commensurable with discursive reason. This is why beauty - not gluttony, drug abuse or theatrical excess - is at the centre of the noble discussion of pleasure. It's not that wisdom overlooks indulgence; it knows it only too well as a threat to truth, happiness and genuine pleasure. In this, pleasure has been written up as reserved for those delights which reconfirm

the rational and free self. All other enjoyment is accused of self-deception, self-destruction, and so forth. This leads to what I'm calling the ordering of pleasure. When Elvis sacrificed his beautiful body by giving in to bodily cravings he slid from near the heights to the ultimate depths of the ordering of pleasure. To choose burgers over beauty and health is, for these thinkers, to go against your own best interests. To do this knowingly, at least for Aristotle, is to have an incontinent will (to use your free will despite yourself). This is the heart of the matter: wisdom combines pleasure with truth and happiness by insisting that your tastes complement the pursuits of knowledge and ethics.

What's at stake here can be illustrated by looking briefly at the joys of masochism. I don't mean the popular misconception that the masochist paradoxically finds pleasure in pain - though this alone shows the ordering of pleasure to be at risk. I'm thinking of the masochist as someone who sets up a theatre of sensuality full of games, toys and rôles - all of which cast the masochist as if s/he is at the mercy of an accomplice. In other words, the masochist is a subject who takes pleasure in the surrendering of subjecthood. Strictly speaking, then, the masochist - although the author of their own eroticism - isn't the subject of pleasure at all, because, having surrendered the integrity of the subject, their delights can't claim the dignity of the category of pleasure. With no interest in the true interests of their own or their partner's 'self', the masochist flouts the ecology of aesthetics, ethics and rationality. In fact, the masochist's first pleasure is the renunciation of wisdom because s/he finds joy against the ordering of pleasure. Philosophers and priests have an anxiety for the subject which means that they will condemn the masochist but love the wise recluse. These two types shape themselves around denial, but it is the sort of denial involved that sets them apart.

Anxieties about the subject have always turned on questions about the body. The masochist is always willing to sacrifice the soul for a few moments of bodily bliss; the recluse will do without everything connected to the body in order to be closer to God and truth. Artists adopt similar positions. The thing is, wisdom has always derogated the body, with its corruptions and distractions, as a threat to truth. There is a foolishness of the body: it's always liable to the contingencies, myopia and errors of passion, appetite, need. This is why fasting, which is as old as religion itself, is regarded as a technique of seeking proximity to God. When fasting the soul is not being jostled by the seductions and satisfactions of salivating mouths, rumbling bellies, delicious smells, and all devastating invitations to bite, chew, suck and swallow. Food is an enemy of the soul because the mouth and belly couldn't care less about eternity.

You wouldn't find much enthusiasm here for Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas' T-shirt slogan, "have you wanked over me yet?" In this work the body is all over the place - dressing it, teasing it, speaking of its urges and mechanics, perhaps even affecting it with laughter or a blush. Moreover, their bare-faced questioning imagines a disorderly intermingling of the

bodily and the intellectual, figuring the body (itself fired up by fantasies) as overwhelming the mind. So, even if artworks of this sort can be made to feel at home in high-minded company, the thrills they speak of are supposed to be understood without indulgence, appreciated without getting carried away.

This is why Socrates opposed knowledge and the body: "I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body". For philosophers and priests the body is an undisciplined mob, forever confusing and misleading the rational and free mind with short-term gratifications and ill-considered desires. Even Nietzsche, the greatest opponent of truth's hatred of 'instinct', who is relentlessly anchoring the highest endeavours of the mind in the lowest workings of the body (German Idealism, he says, was caused by German cooking - one has to be 'selfless' to put up with such food!) - even Nietzsche regards thinking and solitude - a thorough cleanliness - as higher and more exalted than the body because of its distracting thirsts.

You get a clearer example of this fear of the body within a general anxiety for the sovereignty of the subject in the writing of Erich Fromm. His famous Marx-plus-Freud guide to personal and political health, "Art of Loving", is a manifesto for the ordering of pleasure in line with the requirements of the autonomous self. His distinctions between mature love and dependent love follow the contour of the distinction between genuine pleasure and bodily enjoyment. Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity. This is why he tuts at lovers who lose themselves in each other, who ache with an exorbitant desire. Above all, Fromm is frightened of falling - falling in love, falling for someone, falling into something. Scared to death of making a mistake, he precludes all forms of seduction and thrill from entering the private property of his neat, ordered, balanced self. And then he extends his anxiety for 'falling' to include "masochistic submission to fate, to sickness, to rhythmic music, to the orgiastic state produced by drugs or under hypnotic trance". As such, Fromm is an intractable exponent of truth's ordering of pleasure because it is a regime that protects the subject against its own moments of weakness and self-neglect.

Elvis, the masochist, and the yobs, weirdos and wasters of contemporary art, all fail spectacularly to reconcile their tastes with the family group consisting of beauty, happiness and truth. Instead, they are seduced, duped, intoxicated, led astray. You would expect to find some of this in a Bank exhibition entitled 'Fuck Off'. And yet, the show was disappointingly smart. Nevertheless, it contained a work that knows exactly what getting carried away is all about: Rebecca Warren's neon sign which states, in a doubled handwriting, "trust yer unconscious". It combines the informality and sensual materiality of the colloquial voice, and the warm self-examination of the diaristic note, with the theatrical seductiveness of the culture industry's basest (though perhaps most sublime) technique, and a recommendation to develop a closer relation with urges, drives and fantasies that have been

repressed. It is a paradoxical goal, but I still want to see this sign in a boutique for bodily ornament, in a club full of sweaty bodies, above my bed, or in an art exhibition which sniffs at aesthetic propriety—in the toilets at the CCA perhaps.

I'm not arguing for the discourse of the body, or what came to be known as the embodied eye. This sort of critique was fashionable in the 80s. The New Art Historians, for instance, extended Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the secretions of power within the seemingly innocuous operations of pleasure, in theories of the embodied eye—the cultural gaze as a kaleidoscope of gender, class, race and so forth. It figures the gaze as a site of struggle. Recent attacks on the social history of art, for a more familiar looking defence of art's autonomy and judgements of taste, argue that questions of value and judgement cannot be reduced to psychic, social, political, historical questions. The stalemate which results considers what I'm calling the hierarchy of pleasure as either hierarchy or pleasure. And in both cases the foolishness of the body is renounced, through politicisation or sublimation. In other words, the aesthetic affirmation of pleasure and critical theories of embodiment alike are suspicious of the pleasures of the body.

What serious artists, critical theorists, philosophers and priests guard against with their fear of bodily excitation is what Adorno called the 'subjectless subject'. It can be understood as a warmed-up, industrialised, administered, mass version of Aristotle's concept of incontinence: only nominally a subject at all, the subjectless subject is consumed by momentary gratifications which bombard it relentlessly from all sides. Adorno was a chilling critic of the slightest trace of barbarity, authoritarianism, alienation, horror, inhumanity. As far as he was concerned, when he scarpered from Nazi Germany to exile in New York, he had swapped one form of totalitarianism for another. Capitalism's culture industry might be a softer totalitarianism than Hitlerian fascism, but Adorno was not soft on its abuses, corruptions, and violations. He spat evangelical poison at jazz, Hollywood, and even the way radio used only memorable sections of classical music. For Adorno, the totally administered society of technological capitalism had resulted in a totally administered subjectivity for which every aspect of life had been damaged by omnipresent brutality.

Such a predicament, for Adorno, requires cultural diligence: blackness, silence, negation, dissonance. This is the repertoire of an art which registers beauty as the promise of happiness betrayed. Art's self-reflexive attention to its own unhappy situation is thus a central component of the resistance to totalitarianism, and merges political, ethical and epistemological truths in an aesthetics of formal self-suspicion. Art's critical burden has never been quite this sobering.

Adorno's concept of the 'subjectless subject' stands in sharp contrast to his imagined artist: one consumes, the other produces; one loses him/herself, the other constantly inspects her/himself; one acts with the masses, the other produces her/his own subjectivity out of a rigorous critique of commodity fetishism and its characteristic alienation. Subjectlessness seems to be a negative and inverted image of Adorno's own intellectual, cultured, liberal, poised, snobbish personality. But it's not the case that Adorno hated mass culture because it clashes with his love of books and Beethoven. There is no conspiracy of good taste. With

The things that seem beautiful, inspiring and life-affirming to me seem ugly, hateful and ludicrous to most other people

Pat Califia, Macho Sluts

the entire weight of wisdom behind him (egging him on), Adorno faced the hellish force of capitalism with awful clarity, knowing subjectlessness to involve the gravest of sacrifices—the loss of the emancipated, autonomous self.

Wisdom's ordering of pleasure and its attendant sense of subjectivity and subjectlessness can't be explained away as an effect of social divisions. It is the outcome of a systematic assessment of judgements and experiences in relation to what is taken to characterise truthfulness. Socrates runs away from beautiful boys because the body's appetites distract the soul from eternal truths. Likewise, Nietzsche never spares himself in the pursuit of hard truths; he is strict, persevering, exacting, disciplined, austere, frugal, serious. In short, so long as it seems wise to act according to your own best interests, then getting carried away (acting against, despite or with neglect to your best interests) will seem foolish. And not only foolish, but a sort of masochism: taking pleasure in something harmful. In this way the hierarchic ordering of pleasure, even the affirmation of restraint, can make a good case for itself as benevolent and enlightened. What has to be challenged isn't the ordering of pleasure directly, but the constitution of wisdom that shapes it.

Lusts take your mind away from questions of truth, freedom, and the greater good—at least for a time. Getting carried away is never rational, is unlikely to be ethical, and can't be relied on to serve one's best interests. In a sense, such things are put in abeyance. And the idea of switching these imperatives on and off at will strikes the robust thinker as hypocritical and inconsistent: wanton. Even occasional lapses seem to threaten the integrity of the subject—as if losing yourself in something would be irredeemable, as if having a weakness for something meant an erosion of one's powers, as if getting carried away meant loss of self. Psychologically such principles are dangerous; culturally they lead too easily to prejudices which make the preference for self-reflexive art somehow have the edge over having a good time because it is as if the difference between them is determined by whatever distinguishes truth and error.

Despite appearances, then, it doesn't seem all that wise to ask us never to get carried away. Even if the systematic thinker expects it, consistency is certainly not practically necessary. Wisdom's ordering of pleasure distributes guilt to forms of enjoyment that are too unhinged to produce or result from robust debate. As such, the ordering of pleasure is always the surreptitious work of ethics, rationality, theology or whatever. And without this aesthetics wouldn't appear to reconfirm spontaneously the values of wisdom, but would be seen as wisdom's colonisation of bodily experience. Without the surreptitious ordering of pleasure there could be no aesthetic privilege for beauty over

masochism, gluttony or addiction. Contemporary art's indulgence in pleasures of this sort casts itself as unseemingly, ill-advised, brutal: having its thrills in the shadow of the ordering of pleasure.

To defend the willingness to fall—or to be pushed—means to run up against a cluster of very well placed axioms. It is not for nothing that hard thinkers regard subjectlessness and its cousins as damage, illness, contagion, insanity. Being mad for it is, from an intellectual point of view, utterly monstrous. So, in order to get out from under the oppressive grandeur of intellectualism's self-serving attitude to culture, younger artists have lost themselves in worthless preoccupations without the least care to show themselves in a good light. Sue Webster and Tim Noble don't only call themselves 'the cunt' and 'the shit', their works—such as a group of shagging bunnies in a grassy idyll—are simply too risible to compete with the jumped-up institutionalism of Damien Hirst and Douglas Gordon. Baby Conceptualism has given way to something much more infantile. Mixing the kitschploitation of the Chapmans with the strategic art-world nous of Bank, Webster and Noble are setting the tone for an art that doesn't take seriousness seriously, preferring unjustifiable loves because the architecture of justification is uninhabitable.

Dave Beech

E-time, E-space, Emotion...

"In the closed universe he [the artist], he escapes sterility only by that continuous renewal afforded by a game in which nuance acquires idolatrous dimensions and in which a verbal chemistry achieves compounds inconceivable to a naive art. So deliberate an activity, if it is located at the antipodes of experience, approaches, on the other hand, the extremities of intellect."

The Temptation to Exist

"Renunciation is the only form of action that is not degrading."

Anathemas and Admirations

"On this immaculate page, a gnat was making a dash for it. 'Why be in such a hurry? Where are you going, what are you looking for? Relax!' I screamed out in the middle of the night. I would have been so pleased to see it collapse! It's harder than you think to gain disciples."

Anathemas and Admirations

"In front of poverty, I am ashamed even of music."

On the Heights of Despair

DO THE UNTRANSLATED thoughts of a Rumanian writer exist if there is no English ear to hear them? Like the philosophical tree in the forest, E. M. Cioran may not have made a sound, but he surely fell over. Explorers to deepest Paris brought back word: "Yes, he works. Yes, it hurts." Here be monster intellects... perhaps. How would we know, lacking the language skills? Though translated into English from the sixties, the works were unavailable here due to a legal huff, or a Harvard plot or something. My own attempts at booklegging came to nothing. Forlorn, I went to drown my sorrows, and, just when I was impressing the bloke next to me, the barman says, 'Cioran?—Quartet Encounters you want mate.'

Now it is one thing to have a pet-intellectual hero whose name you are unsure to pronounce and whose pre-eminence is effected on the heights of the four spindly quotes that comprise your knowledge of his oeuvre. Another to behold a parcel from the book mongers that may have clay feet writ large upon it, to be revealed only by your powerful x-ray vision... as if. This boy's from Krypton; able to leap off tall buildings in a single bound.

As the Job club would have it, Cioran is a philosophical essayist with aphoristic experience. Born in Rumania in 1911, by 1937 he had completed his post grad study at Bucharest University when he won a coveted scholarship with the French Institute to Paris. And there he stayed, soon deciding to write only in French. Only his first collection, 'On the Heights of Despair' (1934), was written in Rumanian. The title derives from Rumanian journalists' habit of prefacing the obituaries of suicides with the phrase. His themes are suffering, mind, insomnia, death, madness, music and the salutary

effects of lying down in the face of it all. You might not choose to read it to your friend in the hospital, but he's a good laugh really. If you like your laughter so slow and deep that you mistake its undulations for moods you are having. It is Transylvanian laughter after all. Even this first book though, has a Franco-feel that goes beyond theme and style. In his sensibility and droll elegance he out Frenches the French, and they do so love that in a foreigner—look at Monsieurs Picasso and Beckett, and their exile Joyce, par another example. Yet even the French initially championed him unread, taking the word of the few who had read him in the Rumanian. Cioran has a PR angel where we make do with mere guardians. I'd read an essay or two on him which told me little but that he was much admired for vague reasons. Then this in Newsweek: "If it hadn't have been for the possibility of suicide, I would have killed myself years ago."

Suddenly I love this man. I want to take him for a drink and talk him into it. It isn't the humour, paradox, bathos, irony or self-deprecation that gets me. Despite all that, something else is happening. Cioran has elsewhere described his work as diagnostic (di-agnostic, when two or more don't know for certain?). He may be telling me I'm sick, but I rather see his aphorisms as prescriptions for the condition—how to tread air in the abyss. It says, when on the horns of a dilemma, sit on the bull's head and hold tight to the pointy bits. It is a call to remember that survival is a way of life, and not something that operates only at crucial points.

Logically the phrase is an ourobus, biting its own tail—a position simultaneously self-destructive and self-sustaining. Not a time for action, but to persist. But all this is plan B. Plan

A, I feel, is the use of the mechanism of emotional resonance, a communicative mode which works only if the receiver has experienced similar emotions. Emotion is the memory of being, and like smell, evokes the whole experience it is bound to, the time and place and myriad streams of consciousness associated with it, whether the emotion is depressive or ecstatic (odd how many emotional terms are spatial in origin). Extreme emotional states such as trauma, for example, have many possible causes, but the human reactions to it are clearly delineated, and few. The experience of trauma is homogeneous—indeed, to the extent that we say Post-traumatic stress is syndromic. In the diagnosis and treatment of the condition, only the evolution of its stages is characterised; self-blame, survival guilt, aggression, fear, etc. Cioran, to the contrary, addresses and is informed by the resolved, consolidated condition. He uses tactical emotional bomblets, that, if they strike home at all, strike hard.

But perhaps I'm out of my depth. Although such emotional resonance is a highly effective mode of communication, some, like Theo Adorno, reject it out of hand. Adorno insists on 'non-participatory teleologies,' that is, his participatory teleologies. What he means is, you don't dream because he cannot verify it. But, if all teleologies are to be non-participatory, who is to participate in them? Anyone with experience of a similar enough one to resonate with, I suppose. So get a life Theo. Or a near-death experience. Better still, get a book: "On the Heights of Despair" (1934), "The Temptation to Exist" (1956), "Anathemas and Admirations" (1986), "History and Utopia" (1960), E.M. Cioran, Quartet Encounters.

Michael Donaghy

Tea and Videos in Paris

Around tea time (16.00 hrs) on the first and last Sunday of each month, Corine Miret and Stephane Olry organise a screening of video works in their apartment in the Le Marais district in Paris. Tea and biscuits are served in the living room while the bedroom is set up for viewing.

The organisers wanted to combat that "terminal" Sunday feeling, the terrible boredom of the day in the week they both dreaded. Corine—a fan of different kinds of teas—combined their enjoyment for tea and cake with a good excuse for cleaning and rearranging their apartment to focus into the organisation of Thes Videos.

Set up in 1993, their public grew gradually through word of mouth and from Stephane and Corine's contacts within the world of art, theatre, dance, cabaret and multi-media events, Corine Miret is a dancer, Stephane Olry is a theatre director and writer and together they operate a production company called "La Revue Eclair" which organises large multi-media events.

With Thes Videos, invitation cards are sent out every few months to already established contacts and some are left in gallery spaces. The invitation cards are mainly to announce when screenings will recommence after the summer, winter or autumn breaks or when Corine and Stephane have returned from travelling and working outside Paris.

Entrance is free but a donation box is situated in the lobby for contributions, a

list of video works is provided when viewers enter. All videos are selected from their personal archive, to date, the archive comprises of sixty to seventy videos mainly by French makers with a few other Belgian, Dutch and German works. The organisers collect and screen video work that they like, their choice is purely subjective. This becomes evident when they introduce individual works and give a brief background to them, they take a great delight in what they show.

Their preference is for direct, live to camera works in 'real time,' often with an element of humour. They do not favour flash technical skills and paint-box usage. In this sense their archive represents a current trend in art for highly subjective personal works in 'real time.'

On the occasion I was there, one video played showing its maker (head and shoulders shot to camera) singing a well-known French pop song without the aid of music or an accompanying record. All the pauses, timing and intonations were perfectly studied and memorised and the video maker's complete sincerity in his rendition caused great hilarity amongst viewers.

Three to four new titles appear each month. The archive grows organically through word of mouth and it is the video makers themselves who approach Thes Videos with their works.

Care is taken to inform each video maker about the reception of their video, to describe and explain the context within which the work will be shown if the

maker is not already familiar with Thes Videos. This is important as throughout a screening viewers may come and go, out for a cigarette, a cup of tea or a chat. The television/monitor itself is more than simply a 'black box,' being camouflaged in a 50s sci-fi style and set up as a unique, almost sacred object. Mattresses and cushions are littered across the floor accommodating ten persons comfortably and fifteen at a push. The apartment is spacious enough, but for organisational ease numbers do not exceed twenty/twenty-five. In 'le salon' where tea is served, viewers get together to decide what they would like to watch. A list of video works is provided on entering, these being generally of short duration, between three and five minutes, with the occasional thirty to fifty minute video included for those who enjoy an element of perseverance. Some people turn up uniquely to view videos, others come simply to discuss, without watching a single work.

Corine and Stephane are themselves video makers, producing video postcards whenever they travel, and naturally they are included in the archive for viewing. Thes Videos started up again in September and any video maker passing through Paris with a copy of their video under their arm, and in need of a cup of tea can contact Corine Miret and Stephane Olry: 11 Rue Des Arquebusiers, 75003 Paris. Telephone 42 77 16 62

Louise Crawford

Reeling in the Real

review

The Return of the Real

The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century,

Hal Foster

MIT Press, October 1996,
\$30/£19.50 (cloth), \$17.50/£11.50 (paperback)

OVER TEN YEARS ago, writing in the preface to his widely-read anthology *Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster proposed a distinction between two types of postmodernism. "In cultural politics today," he observed, "a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction."¹ One of the virtues of *The Return of the Real* is that Foster hasn't forgotten or otherwise neglected this distinction, with his new book holding to an all-to-often dismissed concern for a radical and far-reaching critique of the reactionary avenues of postmodern art and culture. But whether or not it is actually possible, today, to develop and to act upon an extensive, effective critique of capitalist culture is a question Foster, in the final run, appears unable to answer.

But such a question as that posed by Foster regarding the status and effectivity of critical practice is perhaps the kind of question that can't easily be answered, and certainly not in any direct sense. Nor can the role of the critic and of criticism itself be reduced down to a few smartly argued positions and theories. *The Return of the Real* virtually begins with an acknowledgement of this intractable situation, with Foster launching straight into a fistful of difficult questions concerning criticism itself: "what is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore administered—from an artworld dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore affirmative—especially in the midst of culture wars that prompt the right to threaten *love it or leave it* and the left to wonder *where am I in this picture?*" (p.xv). The emphatic tone thrown out by such italicised speckles of text as are found in this and other similarly searching passages of prose might very much irritate the reader where he or she not also presented, throughout this work, with many instances of a much less table thumping tone. Foster's postulates, his outline map of recent and contemporary critical and aesthetic practice is, most of the time, subtle enough to support the occasional conveyor-belt questioning. There isn't too much finger-pointing actually. You don't often feel that the local SWP representative is knocking on your door, pen and clipboard in hand, asking you to sign up for "revolutionary" activities about which they assume you so far know nothing.

In other words, *The Return of the Real* is not a patronising book smugly plugging, as its title might all too readily imply, a "return" to "commonsense" accounts of art and its relation to politics. The "return" of the title doesn't carry with it the sort of conservatism that was evident in, say, the "return to painting" of the early 1980s, a loose but influential move within the academic and curatorial art community that called for the resurrection of good, "solid" technical skills and subject matter, these being pushed as a morally uplifting response to all that funny conceptual stuff from the late 1960s and 70s. In a recent interview Foster summarises the focus located, if obscurely, within his title. It is, he tells us: "...meant to evoke two different ideas of the real which govern much art and theory

today. The first is... the real of the obscene, of things that are too close, too gross, to be represented, of things that resist the symbolic or (better) that reveal its order to be in crisis, of which the damaged, diseased, or dead body is then presented as evidence. The other is the real of identity, of community, of site-specificity..."²

One of the readings of the real that the book examines is, as Foster says in the Flash Art interview, that of "...the present fascination with trauma. In both popular and vanguard culture there is a reconception of appearance as *traumatic*—of experience as its own loss, without punctual presence or coherent narrative."³ Chapter 5, the title of which echoes that of the book, examines a range of artists whose work confronts the dismembered or otherwise disaffected human body—the Warhol of car crash disasters and race riots, Andres Serrano's morgue photographs, the oddly sectioned models of bodies installed in galleries by Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman's paradoxical self portraits—these works and those of other artists are subjected to analyses grounded in the psychoanalytical considerations of Lacan and Kristeva. It is the body and notions of self and other which are most directly addressed here, a theme which is further taken up in the following chapter, a study of the "otherness" of the Other and, indeed, of the very construction of concepts of "the Other." If the issues at stake are complex the writing is clear and to the point. Foster is at pains to stress what he argues is now *the* dominant model of the artist: "the artist as ethnographer." No longer championing the downtrodden proletariat (itself an extreme denomination of alterity), contemporary practitioners have changed the site of their gaze to that of the "Other" in terms of racial and cultural difference.

Elsewhere in the book several other positings of "the real" are given up to readings of acute scrutiny. One "real" to which there is a return is the substantial physical and intellectual reality offered by Minimalism and Conceptual art. With such examinations it becomes apparent that Foster's sense of return is in fact the opposite of that of the "return to painting" to which I above refer. Foster's contention is that the radical issues raised in the 1960s and 70s were themselves in part a return to an even earlier moment of radical questioning, that of Dada and Surrealism (and these via another "level" of return, that occupied by New York Dada, particularly that of Rauchenberg and Kaprow). One begins to get a picture, as one progresses through Foster's book, of an extremely clever intermeshing of events and questions, relationships between "key" moments of twentieth-century art practice and theory being drawn out in a convincing and subtly structured way. Thus contemporary art has, in its important manifestations, returned to what one might call "limit points" of previous practice. This "real" is not the ideological real of academic, naturalised practice but a reality that is that of the embodied human subject. Though two aspects of "the real" are brought out in Foster's Flash Art interview remarks, the book's title in fact appears to allude to a multiplicity of equally serious, equally important "reals".

Though long considered an outmoded notion, the entity of the avant-garde returns in Foster's work as an immensely important trigger, a kind of avenging angel returning from the future via the agency of innovative contemporary art. Throughout his text Foster is keen to stress a notion of delay (partly unpacked from the concepts of Freud) through which radical critique is retrospectively connected to other insistent moments of transgression. The figure of Walter Benjamin, particularly through his speculations upon the correlation between two idiosyncratic historical periods, haunts Foster's own network of moments, movements and spatial and chronological alignments.⁴ The very idea of the avant-garde suggests a time of waiting, a holding out until the broader culture correctly (so to speak) connects with the advance party of artists and thinkers whose aim it is to assemble and activate the new reality. It is pertinent, then, that Foster's book begins with

the aforementioned set of questions about the function and possibility of critical practice today, and equally apt that the discussion of these concerns is immediately followed by a chapter scrutinising Peter Burger's provocative *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, of which Foster is extremely critical.⁵ This leads into some consideration of the boundaries of art and its institutions. There are many insights upon which one might ponder at length—I'll quote just one: "...the institution of art may enframe aesthetic conventions, but it does not constitute them." (p.25)

Other points of concern in *The Return of the Real* include the "cynical" art of Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Peter Halley (amongst other "Neo Geo" and related practitioners). Their "defiant complicity" (Bickerton) is carefully disentangled. Much also is said about poststructuralist theory and its direct connection with a great deal of the ambitious art of the last twenty or thirty years. As one progresses through the book a large number of discrete examples are drawn together to form a picture of late twentieth century practice. Even if one sometimes disagrees with the detailing and the dovetailing of contrasting territories, Foster's speculations generate a mass of noteworthy directions for critical pursuit. I began by suggesting that Foster isn't able to answer his own questions about contemporary art. What is important though is that, at a time when much of the legacy of conceptual art is scurrilously derivative in a shallow or more or less uninteresting way (I refer to the eponymous phenomena of "Brit Art") Foster's book convincingly suggests that work made in the 1960s and 70s provided the grounds for genuinely radical practices to emerge. There is a hint that the radical potential of much that took place two or three decades ago has not yet been realised. Such an actual realisation, indeed even, in a certain sense, the recognition of that period's latent potential, allows for a field of practice of greater significance than that of the limp one-liners upon which today's market spotlight all too tediously falls. There is an understanding of fashion and its fluctuations buried within Foster's analysis, one informed by a politics which, quite unfashionably, is not afraid to call itself by that name. If Foster retains a belief in the future emergence of a transformatory critical practice it is because he grasps the *unfinished* form of culture which, even in this time of "evermore administered" multinational capitalist expansion, is not open to reliable prediction. That's one more way of considering the "real" of the book's title: a real that has to be made in practice, in actuality, that isn't already part of the foreseeable future. "There is a new set of concerns amongst artists, critics, and audiences. I am not very active in this situation, but I think there are important stakes there. And it makes me feel focused again, for I see connections with what came before and what may lie ahead. It is strange to be optimistic in a depressive moment, but I am." [6]

Peter Suchin

Notes

1. *Postmodernism: A Preface*, in Hal Foster (Ed.) *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, pp xi - xii.
2. Miwon Kwon/Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real, An Interview with Hal Foster*, Flash Art, Vol. XXIV, No. 187, March - April 1996, p.63.
3. *Ibid*, p.63.
4. Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the philosophy of History*, in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, 1979. Benjamin's *The Author as Producer*, a lecture delivered by Benjamin in 1934, is another important work for Foster. It is included in Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht*, NLB, 1977.
5. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester University Press, 1984.
6. Hal Foster in Kwon/Foster Flash Art.

review

British Rubbish

Sue Webster and Tim Noble

Independent Art Space London, June 22–August 3.

A Union Jack rubbish bin, flattened to resemble an oversized cod-piece, greeted visitors to *British Rubbish*. I wanted to ask where the safety pins were but I resisted the temptation, not wishing to offend the two artists invigilating their show. I shouldn't have worried. A catalogue featuring biographical fragments included ironic references to Punk and a number of crudely drawn self-portraits portrayed Noble and Webster as foul-mouthed misfits. All this served to reference the zenith of white, teenage rebellion as a vanishing point for the pair's work; a period revisited by more than a few artists and critics of late. Neville Wakefield has argued that Punk's legacy is a crucial component of the new art currently being produced by the Brilliant generation, particularly Punk's DIY entrepreneurial spirit, but also its promotion of shock tactics, which Wakefield has unfortunately attempted to place in a tradition of détournement. Noble and Webster's unashamedly hammy performance as white trash, however, was without romance and raised questions about other artists behaving badly.

British Rubbish was a collection of crude allegories and cheap jokes and the exhibition appeared as something not all together wholesome amidst the diversions offered by the 'Capital's' other summer shows. The installation *Everything Was Wonderful* was one such allegory: hidden behind an impeccable privet-hedge, this Tamazipan induced utopia presented a suburban or country garden, populated by a family of mechanical rabbits. The rabbits ate, fucked and bobbed out of holes, but they seemed far from wild. The slow repetitive movements of these petite-bourgeois animals indicated that they were probably pets belonging to the children of the Stepford (or Cheltenham) Wives. This installation, comparable to the occasional displays of paradise in shopping malls, could have been interpreted as a timely reminder that 'England is still dreaming', but there remains a possibility that the artists were celebrating the unproductive and the useless as well.

While Noble and Webster's exhibition did employ a liberal dose of vernacular culture, by labelling themselves and their work *British Rubbish* the pair managed to distance themselves from the hiatus surrounding the 'Britishness' of new British Art, or at least the hip, swinging Britishness currently being celebrated both here and abroad. Through this act of self-degradation, Noble and Webster cultivated a negativity at a time when the feel the good factor had reached endemic proportions in Britain's art scene. As Julian Stallabrass has recently written, new commodities are trash waiting to happen, and Noble and Webster similarly repudiate the new, tarnishing the high production values of their installations in the process. Despite this negativity though, Noble and Webster did not distance themselves from a vernacular of British popular culture as their allegorical installations clearly located the artists in a specific geopolitical space.

The theme of non-productivity was pursued further in Noble and Webster's other installation, entitled *Idealistic Nonsense*, which featured a collection of mechanically powered workmen. Inane grins and kindly eyes gave the workers something of the appearance of Haséks Good Soldier Svejk, the infamous imbecile who spread disaster whenever his masters called upon him to perform his duties and whose reck-

less stupidity was often matched by a knowing cruelty. Standing amidst white plinths, the workmen could have been mistaken for DIY enthusiasts, stupidly spending their leisure time working, but they were far too uniform in appearance. They could have been a team of Minimalist sculptors too, but they were clearly trying to waste time and had no love of the materials before them. One worker hammered, one painted and another sawed; all laboured ineffectively. Another workman was squatting with his trousers around his ankles behind a large plinth at the back of the installation; he was enjoying the sensation of a small turd nearly, but not quite, plopping out of his arse on to the painted white surface. A fifth worker hidden inside a plinth revealed his presence by moving his finger in and out of a small hole drilled in the plinth's side. The pleasure gained from this mindless activity may have lain in its crude sexual connotations, but it was just as likely to be pleasure accumulated from avoiding hard work in a dead end job.

Idealistic Nonsense exhibited a clear lack of commitment to get down to the difficult tasks of constructing ideals, building the future or confronting the present and it serves as a good example of the propensity to be useless that Noble and Webster share with a good many others. If this lack of commitment infuriates those Post-Conceptual critical types, who see such attitudes as an abandonment of hard won theoretical positions, then it is worth remembering that those Avant-Garde projects that refused to be functional were collective experiments in doing nothing; which, as Denis Hollier has suggested, was a way of avoiding an aestheticization of politics: something that artists employing a Post-Structuralist paradigm often failed to do at the turn of the decade.

This experiment in irresponsibility, however, does not account for the specific voices and narratives being adopted by a growing number of artists. Like Sarah Lucas, Gavin Turk and Bank; Noble and Webster use narratives and voices that employ a vernacular of British popular culture to evoke, what Slavoj Žižek has called, a fantasy of a collective existence. Perhaps it is no coincidence that at the same moment new British Art developed a successful and distinctive voice, something of a fantasy of collective life emerged in 'Brit Pop' culture too: the most recent and voracious example of this collective fantasy in England must be football's 'homecoming' for Euro 96. Žižek suggests that such collective narratives erupt after being repressed by cultural institutions and he concludes that this experience of repression is felt as a theft of enjoyment. The return of the repressed is sometimes liberating and sometimes ugly, as in Žižek's own country of origin, the former Yugoslavia. In Britain's contemporary art scene, the return of specific everyday voices and narratives has acted to frustrate those institutionalised and aestheticised Post-Modern sensibilities cultivated in the eighties, but at the same time the current hiatus risks an affirmation of stereotypes and cultural chauvinism. This is where the more astute new British artists resist such dead-ends, by problematising identity whilst still enjoying the luxury of bad behaviour and irresponsibility. In contrast to an artist such as Sam Taylor-Wood, whose piece *Slut* is a one-dimensional celebration of a stereotype, Sarah Lucas's adoption of an aggressive, and often derogatory, vulgar male voice impacts upon her identity as a female artist, creating a complex and contradictory voice. This complexity is also found in the early work of Gavin Turk whose appropriations of British popular culture and the products of fame, through such objects as a wax work Sid Vicious and a heritage plaque, are confounded by the museum format Turk uses for the display of his work:



Turk presents his work and himself as already being dead; that is, as already being consumed by the culture industry. Following the lead of their contemporaries, Noble and Webster similarly refuse to affirm the vernacular that they embrace and thus complicate their identity as British artists.

There is though another level to Noble and Webster's work, but it is one that they have less control over. It concerns the fabrication of identity, which is something that has become an important feature of new British Art. From the bad boy posturing of Hirst to the recent successes of Tracy Emin and the Chapman Brothers, there has been an emphasis on the 'personality' of an artist, which has greatly assisted the successful reception of contemporary art by the media. Considering the emphasis placed upon the individual in the economic and social culture of the eighties and early nineties, this is perhaps not surprising. Noble and Webster address this 'personality factor' in their drawings and their catalogue by portraying themselves as foul-mouthed wannabees and labelling themselves 'The Shit and The Cunt' after the patron saints of new British Art, Gilbert and George. However, although Noble and Webster attempt to construct themselves as negatives, they still want success, quite reasonably, as a lack of success can equal marginalisation and silence; and to achieve visibility entails making the right moves and knowing the right people, which contradicts their representation of themselves as misfits. This is a dilemma faced by any artist attempting to maintain a negativity within their work and it is a contradiction that can not be easily resolved. In a timely intervention Noble and Webster take this contradiction to its limit. The duo wear their petite-bourgeois career aspirations on their sleeves and, through their second-hand Gilbert and George posturing, flog a dead horse to good effect.

David Burrows

“Oh, I love trash...”

review

Julian Stallabrass

GARGANTUA: manufactured mass culture

Verso, pbk 185984 0361 £12.95 hbk 185984 9415 £39.95

ANALYSIS OF MASS CULTURE has shifted considerably since the 1930s. This has much to do with the rise of cultural studies as a separate discipline in the late '60s. The old school socialist critique of mass culture as the embodiment of false-consciousness, and the patrician liberal view of mass culture as the destruction of taste and cultivation, have largely retreated, as popular TV, Hollywood film, comics, and recently computer games, have become acceptable areas of study. Crucial to this shift has been a critique of conventional ideology theory. Following the work done by Gramsci and Bakhtin on language and consciousness in the '30s, the orthodoxy in cultural studies now is a rejection of what has been called, after Althusser, the dominant ideology thesis. Mass culture, it is argued, doesn't reproduce dominant ideology by coercively producing false-consciousness in passive consumers, but is a space of conflicting identifications and desires. For instance, the consumer of soap operas, does not take at face value their world of comfortable homilies, but reads through and against the meanings of the text according to the specifications of class, gender and race etc. This dialogic approach has turned the study of mass culture from something that is seen as manipulating the subject, to something that shapes it in contradictory ways. TV is no longer judged as a one-way flow of homogeneous triviality and unremitting vulgarity but a complex site of intentional pleasure seeking and creative viewer-response.

In the 1980s this dialogic model was widely used in cultural studies to counter the revival of the Hegelianism under the extensive influence of Jean Baudrillard and the Situationists. Baudrillard's understanding of mass culture though was very different from other critics who saw mass culture as a total system of control and the consumer as a mere ideological effect of this system. For Baudrillard the widespread legitimation of the triviality and barbarism of mass culture in the masses was not so much evidence of the super-commodified subject, but in fact a wholesale rejection of the social democratic political process itself. What he called the implosion of the social in the masses was, for him, a kind of utilitarian act of disaffirmation. However, for all its novel inversion of what constitutes resistance to bourgeois culture, Baudrillard's model was clearly within a philosophic tradition which approached mass culture in terms of the erosion of meaning, the homogenisation of subjectivity and the de-politicisation of the public sphere. His later writings may have become guide books for radicals in how to love the vertiginous pleasures of the commodity, but nevertheless for Baudrillard mass culture remains at base a forbiddingly abstract and pacifying experience.

It is little surprise therefore that the dialogic school of cultural studies has upped the ante on both the would-be fluid and open character of mass cultural forms, and the idea of the consumer as an active, creative interpreter. In the 1980s, in the construction of what might be termed a counter-postmodernism or critical post-modernism, many writers on culture borrowed from a revisionist post-Derridean school of philosophy in which the social itself was considered to be elastic and open. Following on from Paul Hirst's infamous attack in the 1970s on Marx's supposed economism—for Hirst material interests cannot be held to have a determinate influence on class consciousness—the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, for example, insisted on a separation of the link together. This allowed cultural theorists susceptible to this kind of thinking in the name of anti-reductionism, to talk about mass culture as if it was structurally open to its own critique, as if the capitalist demands of cultural production could be turned over with hard work and good intentions to enlightened and progressive interests.

Julian Stallabrass's *GARGANTUA: manufactured mass culture* steps into the debate. Yet, Stallabrass's book is less a survey of the literature, or the settling of professional scores within the field of cultural studies, than an unrepentant attack on mass culture as such. “This work will look at stupidity” and “how the decline of thought and principles makes acts of cruelty easier”. It is not often on the left these days you read a full-scale assault on mass culture for its imbecility, boredom and wastefulness, the popular impact of the dialogic model having made such sentiments appear deeply anti-populist and ‘out of touch’. But Stallabrass insists he is not anti-populist, but merely a critic of the way the cultural studies industry has driven the study of mass culture into

a banal relativism. In this *GARGANTUA* positions its critique of mass culture and cultural studies from within the modern tradition of philosophical aesthetics. This is a book written out of the ethical legacy of Adorno, Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, and thus out of a philosophic engagement with the artwork as the negative ‘other’ of commodification.

Adorno, in particular, has come to define the high-ground of the debate. In his aesthetics art has the potential to stand athwart the culture industry given its subjective drive to continually outreach the powers of discursive reason. What art carries before it, therefore, is the possibility of the subject's non-identification with brute social reality, a possibility made in the name of a greater freedom forever touched, but always out of reach this side of the end of the rule of capital. For Adorno this does not mean a defence of art as freedom, but a recognition that however coerced art might be by commodification, its drive to self-determination coincides with the principle of freedom itself: the pursuit of individuation. When postmodernists argue, then, that we are living in a period when the divide between high culture and mass culture has lost all distinction they confuse the very real expansion of art's commodification—its industrial development as ‘entertainment’—with the notion that art's claims for critical autonomy have been superseded. Stallabrass argues, quite rightly, that this supersession is a myth.

However, his defence of critical autonomy and critique of mass culture is very heterodox and at times confused. Stallabrass, in fact, is not interested in giving any kind of post-Adornian defence of autonomy at all, just as his critique of mass culture, despite his coolness towards Baudrillard, is extraordinarily one-dimensional. What interests him first and foremost is the possible radical content of those popular practices that are in internal disalignment with mass culture such as graffiti and amateur photography, where he perceives the disenchantment with mass culture and the social democratic political process to be a broad, collective activity (albeit cut across by age and gender). Autonomous art's implicit critique of mass culture may sustain a utopian glimpse of world beyond capital, but this is confined to a narrow middle-class base. Whatever form the self-conscious incorporation of these limits might take in the production and theorisation of art cannot alter this fact. Popular practices such as amateur photography, and to a lesser extent graffiti, on the other hand, are the result of a generalised will to knowledge, self-representation and creativity. “Slipping out of the noose of avant-garde fashionability amateur photography takes fragments of the world as evidence for an order of things, forcing them into making sense”. “Graffiti...is...consciously oppositional art. It is a ‘criminal act’, made in defiance of commercial and governmental authorities”. In this respect the issue of a self-conscious autonomy is less significant for Stallabrass than the idea of popular cultural practices as a kind of unconscious resistance. Because amateur photographers are concerned with recording an event or scene for their own use and memorialisation this represents a “radical moment” of refusal of commodification.

That amateur photographers take photographs in ‘philistine’ defiance of the bourgeois categories of professional art practice there is no doubt; and there is no doubt that this in certain circumstances can have an explicit class consciousness. Just as urban graffiti is evidence of a thwarted socialised individuality. But ‘unconscious resistance’ remains unconscious, that is, it remains below the level of what Adorno demanded of freedom: self-reflexivity. The issue, here, therefore, is not about the aesthetic value of such practices in relation to the professional categories of art, but how the symptoms and contingent gestures of working-class resistance are theorised in relation to the social cost paid in the split between art and mass culture. Stallabrass is very critical of middle-class cultural theorists projecting their ideas on the non-specialist consumers of mass culture, but I detect a similar kind of projection at work in his theory of cultural resistance. Indeed what is striking about Stallabrass's use of the modern tradition of philosophic aesthetics is his turn to the romantic-primitivism of many of the debates on aesthetics and politics from the '30s. Thus what runs throughout the book is less an Adornian dialectics than a reworked notion of the aesthetics of transgression. Stallabrass's defence of graffiti is loosely reminiscent of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, just as his evaluation of amateur photography remains very close to Lefebvre's endorsement of photographic naturalism as politically more progressive than the avant-garde. As with early Bakhtin and Lefebvre, Stallabrass treats popular cultural practices as oppositional to the overwrought and etiolated intellectual concerns of official, professionalised forms and languages. Subversion lies in unself-conscious playfulness. Such ‘primitivism’ though is not so much counter-hegemonic as anti-hegemonic. The issue is not that graf-

fiti and amateur photography do not at some level contest bourgeois categories of competence and value in art, but that this contestation is always orientated to the ‘unformed’ as radical in itself. In the name of authenticity contestation is identified as a form of ‘not knowing’. These problems are at their sharpest in the chapter on trash.

This chapter is the theoretical core of the book. It is also the point where Stallabrass's aesthetic ‘primitivism’ is connected in an explicit fashion to the questions of art and cultural theory. If Bakhtin and Lefebvre play a formative role, here it is Bataille refracted through Benjamin's theory of allegory and Michael Thompson's ‘Theory of Rubbish’. Bataille's theory of the unformed or informol is well known: the ignoble, the excremental, the impure, what he called the base, were the means whereby the fixed hierarchies of bourgeois rationalism might be rent and destabilised. This direct embrace of the abject and lowly clearly has affinities with Benjamin's allegorisation of the cultural fragment as the symptomatic ruin of modernity's shattered whole. Both positions look to what is remaindered or ‘beyond’ received cultural codes and forms of attention as a means of symbolic interruption. Since the 1930s and Surrealism this allegorisation of the remnant as ruin has flowed into many practices: Warhol, early conceptualism, critical postmodernism, contemporary post-conceptual work. But, following his subordination of the specialist to the popular, Stallabrass is less interested in the ‘primitive’ or philistine as a problem of ideological positionality internal to the dynamics of art, power and knowledge, than in a defence of trash as the universal other of bourgeois culture itself. As he says: “To look to destruction for the positive, and for critique in garbage, is one way of saying how bad things are”. In other words, to recognise trash as the remains of the commodity's allure is to break with the false perceptions of fetishism and therefore to release the ruin's allegorical potential. But if this allegorical power is not to be found in the avant-garde, where is it to be found?: in the street itself. The broken shell of the commodity lying in the skip, the mound of rotting rubbish and discarded household goods on the pavement, functions as part of a continuous, unconscious, permanent act of criticism of the culture.

This idea of rubbish as the ubiquitous ‘other’ of capitalist rationality and the accelerated turnover of the commodity is the key focus of Stallabrass's cultural politics and his notion of critical practice. He replays, therefore, one of the most routinised aspects of early modernism's romantic-primitivism: the idea that the unformed, the grotesque, the anti-aesthetic can provide a utopian glimpse beyond the limits of capitalist order and linearity. Thus he appears to believe that every time we pass a rubbish dump (or for that matter a graffitied underpass) or every time the kitchen bin is full to overflowing we experience a moment of critical insight into the law of value. Rubbish pushes us up close to the brittle surface of the commodity. Whatever the merits of rubbish as a denaturaliser of vision, this is a highly abstract base to begin a cultural politics from. Indeed in a certain way Stallabrass's ‘primitivism’ reminds me of that leap in faith the early Lukacs was left defending in his writing on class consciousness and commodification. For Lukacs, with the expansion of the commodity form and the rise of modern forms of social control and administration, workers' consciousness of capitalism as a total system is subject to the iron logic of atomisation and fragmentation, it would therefore have to take an extraordinary leap in revolutionary understanding for this to change. In Stallabrass's cultural politics the individual's relationship to rubbish seems to function in a similar kind of way to Lukacs' millenarian understanding of history; unconcerned with specific questions of agency and representation rubbish-as-a-site-of-consciousness raising becomes strangely hollow and compensatory.

And this is the fundamental problem with *GARGANTUA*. Stallabrass is not at all concerned with art as a set of immanent and institutional problems, even if he accepts the explanatory power of Adorno's ‘aesthetic paradox’, or law of the divided whole. It leaves him then with a highly attenuated base from which to practice and theorise art, an inflexible model of mass culture as banalised coercion, and a romanticised cultural politics in which an undifferentiated account of the ‘primitive’ carries a universal utopian content. From this it is clear that Stallabrass is responding to many of the substantive issues that are currently preoccupying contemporary art theory in the wake of the expansion of the power of mass culture in the '80s and '90s, and the exhaustion of '80s counter-hegemonic art strategies. Yet because of his over generalised attack on mass culture, the avant-garde and contemporary cultural studies, he is left stranded with good intentions and an over formalised sense of the structural constraints on an ‘art of the every day’ in a divided society.

John Roberts

Hybrid Electronica

Robert M. King cut and pastes his way through some current experimental CD releases.



STILLPOINT

Browsing through the racks of the more discerning record stores it is heartening to see a renaissance in the fields of experimentation and collaboration. Musical barriers and genres are becoming less divided, distinctions and labels are becoming blurred, paving the way for a wealth of audio adventures and electronic possibilities. Seemingly disparate musicians converge in the studio and live arena; Improv veterans like AMM's Eddie Prevost engaging with Kinetic sculptor Max Eastley and guitar loop-drone guru Robert Hampson (Main), sax supremo Lol Coxhill fusing with the pacific electronica of Australian Paul Schütze, the list is endless. The results creating new cross cultural currents in music's textural paths. This cross fertilisation is being embraced on an internation-

al scale and has emerged from the (post) Industrial scene and the realm of 're-mix culture'.

For a prime example of this new hybrid you need look no further than the latest CD ep by ethno primitive percussionists O Yuki Conjugate. *Sunchemical* (Staalplaat, STCDO96) is six radically different reworkings of this track from their (highly recommended) 'Equator' album (an eclectic fusion of tongue drums, marimbas, body percussion and other world instruments). Highlights of this ep being the intricate droning soundscapes achieved by the aforementioned Robert Hampson and a dancefloor reworking by Charles Webster, the slow keyboards wash over delicate pulsing drum loops and by the time the bass kicks in you can almost imagine a sea of hands held

high in dance anthem fervour.

Andrew Hulme is a member of OYC and has recently launched a mail order only label (7°) with Paul Schütze. During a recent meeting with Andrew he explained that "We just want to keep total control over something for a change, this is our response to various bad experiences with labels over the years, we'll (Paul and myself) be handling every aspect of the releases on the label". Admirable sentiments that pay off as is evident in their first release, *Fell* (7°, 960115) is a lavishly packaged (foil embossed, hard-back, cloth bound, signed and numbered limited edition of 999) collaboration by Schütze & Hulme. Andrew is a seasoned world traveller and has amassed an impressive digital collection of environmental sounds, ranging from hi-fi markets in Bangkok to roadside Gamelan in Bali. They have taken extracts from these recordings and woven them into a seamless travelogue of electronic exotica. Repeated listening to *Fell* continue to reveal the dedication that has gone into this work, new sounds continue to emerge if you listen beyond the ebb and flow of the electronics and attempt to follow the street noises or even the faint strains of the gamelan. This isn't linear listening by any means, the digital editing involved here has created many paths to follow, and listening to this in the open air adds further depth to this remarkable work.

Speaking of the outside environment, the latest release on the American based Projekt label, Steve Roach & Vidna Obmana—*Well of Souls* (Projekt 60) creates a sense of immense space over its two disc set. Roach is best known for his early 'new age' synth epics and more recently with his embracing of ethnic and handmade percussion works (including using his Cannondale mountain bike) whilst VO's Dirk Serries has emerged from a post industrial background to a current approach of an almost minimalist form of sound painting. Combined they have produced a stunning collection of material that is a vast expanse of lush keyboards, disembodied voices, didjeridu and percussion. Titles like 'The Quiet Companion' and 'In the Presence of Something' hint at what they are trying to achieve here, this music is meditational and contemplative and a welcome change to the daily

PAUL SCHÜTZE



Distribution:

7°, P.O. Box 2222, London W1A 1XD
Beyond - Pinnacle
Projekt - Cargo
Staalplaat - Vital
Worm Interface - Pinnacle / D.O.R. Infinity.

noise that pollutes our minds. In fact (as a side issue), recent publications from the World Forum For Acoustic Ecology have pointed to evidence that indicates that day to day noise is having a detrimental effect on our bodies. The packaging for *Well of Souls* mirrors the sounds within, warm ochre colours blend and almost reveal what appears to be tribal paintings from some previously undiscovered race. There is nothing 'solid' to grasp onto here, just as you start to identify a sound it fades and moves of to allow a new texture to emerge. A release that you will return to again and again.



O YUKO CONJUGATE

The global ambient trio that is Tuu have been something of a personal favourite since their first release a couple of years ago, so I was excited to receive *Maps Without Edges* (Beyond, RBAD-CD16) by Stillpoint a collaborative venture from Tuu's Martin Franklin, percussionist Eddie Sayer (from *Lights In a Fat City*) and flautist, performance artist Nick Parkin. Similar in many ways to *Well of Souls* the material contained here is a trance inducing excursion to lost lands. *Maps* is a slow inward improvised spiral of rich textures. A dense blanket of processed gongs envelopes the deep pulsing tones of the water drums, whilst the quiet ebb and flow of the percussion and incidental sounds is occasionally broken by peaks of fractal electronics. A fascinating work.

If all of this sounds a bit too organic for your noise craving ears then hard-wire yourself into the future courtesy of *alt.frequencies* (Worm Interface, WI007) a compilation put together by Rockitt (DJ / musician and owner of record store 'Ambient Soho'). This is the sound of a recombinant digital culture morphing into new cell structures almost as soon as your finger hits play on the CD player. Forget media hype buzzwords, intelligent techno—drum 'n' bass—hardstep, *alt.frequencies* invents new ones and watches them implode. Highlights include the hyper electronic tempos of Freeform, the drill 'n' bass velocity of Tom Jenkinson (aka Squarepusher), the smooth urban sprawl soundscapes of Coma (Astral Engineering) and the crystal shard electronica of Gescom (Autechre). The remaining seven contributions (from WI artists and friends) covers similar ground and planted there are the seeds of new approaches to experimental / electronic music, all wrapped up in an exquisite hand finished textured card sleeve, what more could you want?

Stewart Home interviews ex-K Foundation member Jimmy Cauty... eventually

There's no success like failure

IT BEGAN with a phone call from a publicist who asked if I'd like an all expenses paid helicopter trip across Dartmoor to witness former KLF star Jimmy Cauty demonstrate his sonic gun. Next came a press release which promised that the formidable and highly dangerous Saracen Armoured Personnel Carrier Audio Weapons System would transmit sonic frequencies and run down photographers for my amusement. The press statement was accompanied by sixteen pages of recent cuttings detailing the deadly effect Cauty's 'noise tank' had on cattle when he demonstrated the weapon for the amusement of a few friends.

From the start, I suspected something dodgy was going on. Cauty built his career in the music industry on the back of stunts and scams. The first KLF album 1987 received rave reviews, but the record was soon suppressed by lawyers acting for ABBA who objected to the heavy sampling of their hit single *Dancing Queen*. Drummond and Cauty milked the legal proceedings for press coverage, then released a new version of the LP with all the samples removed and detailed instructions on how to recreate the original sound. Later scams included dumping a dead sheep outside the Brit Awards ceremony at which they were named Best British Group. Shortly after this, the KLF announced that they would not be releasing any new material in the foreseeable future and that their entire back catalogue was deleted.

Having relaunched themselves as the K Foundation, Cauty and Bill Drummond turned up at the 1993 Turner Prize to humiliate winner Rachel Whiteread with a forty thousand pound award for being the world's worst artist. This was followed by a controversial trip to Scotland, during the course of which the duo burnt one million pounds. In November 1995, they selected the *Workshop For A Non-Linear Architecture Bulletin* to announce a 23 year moratorium on K Foundation activities. This privately circulated newsletter is so obscure that news of the moratorium is only just beginning to seep through to the general public.

While Bill Drummond is currently collaborating with former rocker Zodiac Mindwarp on a series of novels, Cauty is pursuing various solo projects, including an album of his sonic experiments for release on Blast First Records. After my initial dealings with this outfit, I was more than a little perplexed when further details of the Dartmoor trip were faxed to me by a PR company working on behalf of the band Black Star Liner. Having made it as far as one of the fifty block booked seats on a Devon bound train, I was presented with a set of ear plugs and a personal safety waiver to sign. Since most of those present were acting as though they were on some Boy's Own Adventure, I moved along to the next carriage where I was able to relax. After working out that I'd switched seats, publicists began dropping by to ply me with drinks and plug Black Star Liner, who were performing after Cauty had demonstrated his noise tank.

By the time we boarded a helicopter at Exeter airport, the majority of journalists present were at least mildly drunk. Then, after a twenty minute chopper

ride, disaster struck. The pilot announced that we couldn't land because a mist had swept across the moor. Instead, we returned to Exeter airport where we were told a coach would pick us up and transport us to the acoustic weapons test site. After an hour of waiting, the PR people were going crazy. Meanwhile, an assortment of journalists and photographers were having luggage cart races around an otherwise deserted passenger concourse. The airport had closed down for the night, until one of our party succeeded in activating the public address system and went into pirate DJ mode.

A security guard appeared and attempted to restore order when a bored music journalist switched on a luggage conveyer and one of his friends disappeared down it. Finally, a fleet of cabs conveyed us to the Latern Inn at Ashburton. We'd already miss Black Star Liner. The free bar only mildly improved the gloomy atmosphere that hung over the event. To make us feel better, every journalist present was promised an interview with Jimmy Cauty. We had to go through to another room and talk to Jimmy one at a time. First up was Tony from i-D, who came back quietly complaining that all he got was some incoherent babble about drugs.

When my turn came, I began by asking about the burning of the million quid. Jimmy flatly refused to talk about the K Foundation. Next, I asked Cauty if he was up on the latest research into frequency weapons, which got a much better response. "I know very little about military research into the uses of low frequency sounds as weapons. All this stuff about Advanced Acoustic Armaments is a joke, all I've done is mounted some disco gear onto my two Saracen tanks. Everything the press has written about the sonic guns I'm supposed to have built is just rubbish, the papers want to believe this stuff which is why they are so easy to hoax."

"The event cost fifty thousand pounds to put on,"

Cauty cackled after I told him about the debacle at Exeter airport, "and I'm really pleased with it. What happened at the airport was as much a part of the entertainment as what I did up on the moor. I'd intended to detain everyone up there, the fog coming down was a real stroke of luck. The performance was sponsored by Black Bin Liner and their record company because they thought they'd gain some radical credibility from the stunt.

It might have blown up on the band, but it will still get their name around. After all, they've just played the most expensive pub rock gig ever!"

So there you have it. Jimmy Cauty the side-splitting avant-garde manipulator of the art of hype, who leaves journalists and PR people trapped in a web of their own making. Or, Jimmy Cauty the pop star whose promotional stunts end in Fiasco? The choice is yours. In a knowing post-modern sort of way, I think it's best to accept both versions of Cauty as true.



review

Lorna Miller
Witch

Witch is an independently produced comic by Glasgow Based artist Lorna Miller: after the usual treatment by the old poops in the painting department of Glasgow School of Art, she found healthier inspiration in her gradual awareness of a network of women artists producing comics, particularly through the example of Canadian artist Julie Doucet's autobiographical work, and *Witch* is now in its third issue. Miller is part of the group centred around Parade (with Chris Watson, Yves Tanitoc, Marc Baines and Craig Conlon) which is not just a comic but also a support network, and she is also part of SCCAM a loose association of 100 or so comic makers. While the comic scene in Glasgow can still be caricatured as having a 'loveable' tendency towards the sci-fi male anorak, thick spectacles and a certain retention in and around the anus, it has nevertheless endured, and—perhaps for reasons particular to the status of the medium—it can encompass an independence of spirit, invention and international influence, a strand of which includes the American underground of the 60s and 70s: for those familiar with such comics one could describe *Witch* as a raw version of Raw and Parade a less Arcadian version of Arcade.



Is *Witch* a comic for girls in a male dominated arena? According to Miller most of the readership has been male. Girl's comics are understandably something of an influence, but an influence which takes into consideration that they were designed by men and express plainly stupid notions of what those men thought girls were after. Sorry guys but it looks like all the Bunty's dedicated propaganda about ponies, good deeds, ponies, healthy out-door pursuits and ponies was either wasted on the young Lorna or has festered into subversion in the pages of *Witch* and its all your fault. As I remember it, the cut-out-and-dress doll was never a large kilted hunk with a thick tallywhacker or an 'Elvis Fertility Doll' with an even thicker one. Even though it is practically a certainty that masturbatory aids would have boosted the Bunty's sales, the guys who wrote it just didn't want to take their chances in court. *Witch* is better described as a comic for adults, all you need is some loose change and a slightly twisted sense of humour.

Stylistically *Witch* subtly shifts in its approach to drawing, responding to the mood of the artist, generating an appropriate pace and atmosphere for the subject matter created: a situation strip on the sheer rat-bastard tedium of relationships is loose and spontaneous; while 'Jane' is a combination of Commando style graphic art as a background, with its ever so slightly emancipated 'heroine' incongruously superimposed both graphically and in her satirical response to what the hell is going on around her. Other different approaches feature reworkings of 50's representations of women, including uncomfortably salacious material from ostensibly innocent film annual biographies of 'starlets,' or lunatic advertisements for various things unmentionable in polite society, but deliciously poured over here. While the wholesome world of 'true love' is not exactly ignored as a theme, its treatment does—like the activities of certain insects—have the tendency to end in at least G.B.H. if not the decapitation of the male, and yet imbue the feeling that this is no sad loss to the world.

Above all *Witch* is very, very funny and comes highly recommended, sadly though, as with most small press productions it has encountered the usual reluctance from distributors, even from 'Comic Shops.' Miller is open to responses from readers: "even if people don't want the comic I'd still be interested in hearing from other women out there and finding out their views on what I'm doing."

Witch can be obtained from Hi-Tone Art & Design, 120 Sydney Street, North Gallowgate, Glasgow G31 1JF. Readers can obtain a list of other titles distributed from: Peter Pavement, Slab O' Concrete, PO Box 148, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 3DQ