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WHY IS THERE ONLY ONE MONOPOLIES COMMISSION?

British Art and its Critics In the Late 1970s

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the British art world in the period 1976-1981. The first section explores the crises in the artworld triggered by the International Monetary Fund Crisis of February 1976. Central to this analysis is the Labour and Conservative Party's ideological shift from culturalist paternalism to monetarist liberalism, the history and function of the Arts Council of Great Britain, the press scandals surrounding the Tate Gallery's purchase of Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* and the ICA's exhibition of COUM Transmission's *Prostitution*. The opportunist populist polemics of the 'crisis critics' (Richard Cork, Andrew Brighton, Peter Fuller and John Tagg) are then introduced alongside a discussion of the colossal changes in the British art press. This is followed by an analysis of Cork's defence of Conrad Atkinson's work and of the Royal Oak murals. The second section looks at the postmodernism rejected by Cork and the populist crisis critics, namely, the scripto-visual work of John Hilliard, Victor Burgin, and John Stezaker. The influence of photoconceptualism on community artists and feminist artists is then examined. This is followed by an analysis of Art & Language's critique of 'Semio-Art'. This section concludes with an analysis of the 'new art history' in relation to the practices of Jo Spence and Terry Atkinson. The following section looks at 'conservative'/populist postmodernism as outlined in exhibitions such as *The Human Clay* (1976), *Towards Another Picture* (1978), *Lives* (1979) and *Narrative Painting* (1979). This includes extensive discussion of the work of David Shepherd, Peter Blake, Ron Kitaj, David Hockney, Steven Campbell, Women's Painting (*Images of Men*), and The School of London (*The Hard Won Image*). The final section opens with a lengthy examination of the agitational performances of COUM Transmissions, investigating their decision to abandon the publicly subsidised artworld in order to become the industrial band Throbbing Gristle. This is followed by an examination of British pro-Situationism, punk and new wave subcultures in the 1970s, relating them to the growth of the entrepreneurial art market of the early 1980s. In the conclusion, I consider the relative impact of the 70s art crises and 70s new wave on the Lisson sculpture boom of the early 1980s, and the yBa (Young British Artist) phenomenon of the late 80s to the time of writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Why is there only one Monopolies Commission?

My research over the past three years has primarily focused on the indeterminate relationships between institutions and practical/theoretical shifts in the British artworld since the mid 1970s. These developments are here explored in relation to the momentous political upheaval during last years of the Callaghan administration following the body blow of the 1976 International Monetary Fund crisis, and the revolutionary ultraconservatism of the first Thatcher Government of 1979-1983.

Significantly, it was during this period that the British fine art establishment found itself under resolute attack from both the left and right for the first time since the Second World War. The IMF crisis led the Labour government to look at ways of 'devolving' high culture, advocating social democracy by making the Arts Council of Great Britain financially and ideologically accountable to 'the public'. Given that the British artworld was, at this time, almost entirely dependent on public subsidy, the art and criticism of the period can only begin to be understood if read in relation to its cultural and economic revolutions. This is especially pertinent given that both the Labour Government and Conservative opposition were making populist claims, the Conservatives demanding that the Arts Council be dismantled so that people could choose their own art (if they could afford it). Callaghan's drastic economic experiments were accelerated under the first Thatcher administration, which cut public subsidy and encouraged private patronage. I demonstrate the ways in which the ideological change from Keynesian culturalism to monetarist populism generated and financed the new art of the era: from proto-punk performance to postmodernist object sculpture. In part, then, this is a pre-history of Charles Saatchi's dominance of the British art scene, charting the pedigree of the Young British Artists (yBa) of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Far from advocating the kind of economic determinism found in early Marxist histories of art, this thesis points to the numerous contradictions emerging within the new art and criticism of the late 1970s. In contrast, proponents of the triumphant critical postmodernism of the era (the Semiotic Art, Structuralist Marxism, Feminisms, poststructuralism and New Art History which are the subject-matter of this thesis) have sought to ensure that its powerful and culturally significant reactionary elements are excluded from the official preoccupations of art history and theory. It is also my contention that critical postmodernist accounts of recent British art - as found in the writings of John Roberts and Griselda Pollock, among others - have largely suppressed the importance of forms of cultural practice not associated directly with institutionalised art. Furthermore, I understand that the pursuit of (essentialist) theory has led critical postmodernists to deny historical contradiction. Recently, this critical amnesia has allowed untold opportunism in the British artworld as yBas have sought to displace critical postmodernism, characterising it as an irrelevant and outdated

academic pursuit, eternally stuck in its golden era of the early 1980s. If the theory and art historiography of recent British Art are to escape their present aesthetic relativism, a vast number of practices and debates have to be reconsidered.

In the mid-to-late 1970s practice, theory, criticism and art history interlocked around the question of photography and its relation to the 'crisis' in the modernism. Among many others, visual and verbal dialogues were established between Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin, T. J. Clark, Griselda Pollock, Art & Language, John Tagg, *Camera work*, The Hackney Flashers and Jo Spence. Although I do not want to suggest that participants in these debates constituted a school (united in disagreement), a residue of teleology seems to emerge from their reactions to one another. Operating under the banner of the 'politics of representation', there was commitment to radically revising the history, theory and practice of modernist art and photography along Marxist/feminist lines, but little agreement on the details. While some chose to historicise the politics of representation (Tagg), others suspended it in theory (Burgin).

Great difficulties arise in writing about this. Firstly, contradiction must be maintained in order that some meanings of the period might be reconstructed. However, writing, especially the writing of history, tends to eliminate contradiction since it is a narrative form. Theoretical strategies designed to disrupt narrative, such as deconstruction, tend towards aestheticism in practice. Deconstructions often fail to properly consider contradiction, the theoretical desire to demonstrate the impossibility of reading leads to idealism (i.e. every text they fail to read is seen to contain contradiction.)¹ Another problem emerges in that much of the work in the late 1970s is not merely art history, criticism, theory and practice, but historiography and meta-criticism. This suggests that any accounts of the period will in some way be meta-historiographic but with less opportunity for retrospective contemplation and revision than we might expect if writing about an earlier period. Can an interpretative study of this nature lead to any form of enlightenment, or are we destined to repeat trains of thought that are already prevalent? How can we logically separate our writing and that which it discusses, if both are sustained by similar descriptions?

This only presents part of the problem. The late 1970s was also a period in which the 'avant-garde' came under attack from populists *within* the artworld. Ron Kitaj and David Hockney's made similar, populist defences of painting while making very different practical efforts to tackle the problem. The crisis critics (Richard Cork, Andrew Brighton and Peter Fuller) proposed that artists should restore the artworld with a sense of social purpose. Related to Cork and Brighton's pleas was the work of artists such as Conrad Atkinson, and various forms of Muralism, while Fuller set the agenda for the conservative defence of the School of

¹ To see a difference between things is to see specific qualities uniquely contrasted with each other. To see unspecific, indeterminate differences is a contradiction - it is to see nothing at all. Deconstruction comes down on the side of discord and irreducible complexity as the universal result, whatever the text - the only thing that is new is the element of inflexibility and pre judgement. What was once a result of critical investigation becomes an idealist method.

London in the 1980s. These events were all in some way inspired by the *Daily Mirror*'s criticisms of the Tate Gallery for purchasing Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, or 'the Tate bricks'. Although such populism has been seen as a reaction to the politics of representation, (Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* was called the 'nappy-show' in 1976), in fact, it shared many of its concerns. Both camps were anti-modernist, viewer-orientated, overtly sociological and critical of the Arts Council. Ironically, as the aims and ideals of the left and right became increasingly confused, being involved in the artworld historiography became *more* of a case of taking sides. 'Not one of us conservatism' became prevalent in the left and the right, obscuring the art practices that arose in the early 1980s. The most interesting practical work of the late 1970s, COUM Transmissions, Punk and the New Wave, ridiculed and exploited this situation. In turn, such work became a major target for reprisals in the 1980s when the old critical camps regrouped and begun to do battle over the return to painting.

Current British art is the legacy of this competition for power over the production and interpretation of art. What has been lost are the arguments and contradictions that provided the subject-matter of Punk and New Wave. Instead, the rise of the new art history in the early 1970s allowed strong defences to be built around the politics of representation, or what later came to be called 'critical postmodernism', leaving Punk and the New Wave to fester in cultural studies and sociology. Moreover, in dismissing virtually all new image painting, critical postmodernists failed to recognise the complex post-punk ethos found in the work of painters such as Steven Campbell. The contradictions that produced such work were elided in favour of transforming the contingencies of 1970s Marxism and feminisms into RAE-friendly ahistorical Theory.

In contrast to this managerial despotism, I have taken 'critics' to include artists, anti-artists, art historians, journalists, art critics, anarchists, neo-conservatives, punks and affronted members of the public, among others. By approaching 'critical texts' as a mesh of different discourses at work within the ideology of 'British', 'art' and 'society', I have produced a non-unified history of this period. By focusing chapters around specific groups of artists and critics and making use of quotation, I have sought to allow the rehearsal of accounts of the same events from different points of view. Assumptions about cause and effect, or the relationship between theory, practice and reception differ in each chapter. The time scale of events and the time scale of their description are not the same. Each chapter has a different explanation of events and of the connections between them. This thesis, therefore, presents a deliberately refracted picture of the period in its some of its complexity. In order to partially represent the volatile nature of this period it has been important to introduce some recognition that the concept of closure is ideological, that it is a pretence that issues posed by art historical texts are capable of resolution. I hope that the combining of several contradictory possibilities advises that the production of 'history' is a suppression of possibilities, providing different answers to the question 'why is there is only one Monopolies Commission?'

CHAPTER 1

T.1534 or not T.1534? Is that the Question?

...the Labour Government that nationalised the Bank of England, the coal industry, railways, and health services, also nationalised culture. It was more concerned to enrich the country's cultural life, and to bring it within the reach of people, than any previous Government in the nation's history.¹

Suddenly it was the morning after, with its splitting headache of unemployment, class and racial friction and economic slump. The Seventies, like the Thirties, saw crisis become a daily condition of life.²

As, on the one hand, inflation eroded the value of the Arts Council subsidy, and on the other hand, recession made it impossible for the Government to compensate for inflation's effects, the Arts Council's weakened financial position made its decisions more, not less important for would-be clients.³

Harold Wilson once said, "A week is a long time in politics." At the moment, it is every bit as long in the visual arts. We are living through one of those famous upheavals which are the stuff of art history books, but which are much harder to understand when you are caught up in them.⁴

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state.⁵

On the one hand, by its very nature experimental or alternative art in whatever medium is bound to cause a public stir; on the other hand, from many artists' points of view, funding through the Arts Council of Great Britain was constantly criticised for its conservatism. It began to seem as though the slices of subsidy-cake available were not enough to feed both the artists who defended "art for art's sake" and those who were asking "art for whom?": "rubbish" and "waste of public money" seemed to win the day.⁶

¹JANET MINIHAN, *The Nationalisation of Culture: The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain*, London, 1977, p235.

²NORMAN SHRAPNEL, "Introduction", *The Seventies: Britain's Inward March*, Constable, London, 1980, p13.

³ROBERT HEWISON, "The Arts in Hard Times", *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75*, Methuen, London, 1986, p226.

⁴PETER FULLER, "On Social Functionalism", *Artscribe*, No.13, August 1978, p43.

⁵GUSTAV METZGER, "Art Strike 1977-1980", 1974.

⁶CAROLINE TISDALL, "Art Controversies of the Seventies", in SUSAN COMPTON ed. *British Art in the 20th Century*, Royal Academy, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, p84.

Between 1972 and 1973 the Tate Gallery acquired three works by the American sculptor Carl Andre, a carved wood timber structure entitled *Last Ladder*, 144 *Magnesium Square* composed from the said number of metal floor tiles and *Equivalent VIII* (Tate Gallery No. 1534) a sculpture (re)constructed from 120 firebricks. They were shown without controversy several times during the next few years, until the 15th February 1976 when an article entitled "The Tate drops a Costly Brick"⁷ written by Colin Simpson appeared in *The Sunday Times* Business News section. Here Simpson suggested, without evidence, that Treasury eyebrows had been raised at the use of Government funds to acquire for the nation works of art which included a "stack of 120 firebricks."⁸



Figure 1.1 *Daily Mirror*, February 16th 1976.

Modern art is alive and well and some of its practitioners are laughing their way to the bank. Some forms of public expenditure, it seems are still sacred.⁹

The following day the story created an eruption in the popular press which would make Andre's 'Bricks' the best known work of contemporary art in Britain. Leading the attack was the *Daily Mirror*, which decided to take issue with the fact that *Equivalent VIII* was constructed from artistically unsanctioned materials, ordinary fire bricks, by making a comparison with the going market rate for bricks.

⁷COLIN SIMPSON. "Tate Drops a Costly Brick / How the Tate Gallery Spent £1 million in Two Years", *Sunday Times*, February 15th 1976.

⁸ibid.

⁹ibid. Michael Davies 'Notebook' in the 22nd February 1976 edition of the *Observer* claimed that Colin Simpson's story had been 'engineered' by Douglas Cooper, who had lambasted the Tate and their purchase in one of his regular articles for *Books and Bookmen*. Cooper later received an "Apology" from *The Burlington Magazine* for suggesting that he had played such a conspiratorial role: "he had no conversation with the employees of *The Sunday Times* and did not mention the bricks in his article." EDITOR, "Apology", *The Burlington Magazine*, Volume CXVIII, No. 878, May 1976, p516. Given that Simpson was not the first to write about the purchase - this being achieved by an anonymous employee of the *Basingstoke Gazette* on February 13th 1976 - he could easily have plagiarised it from another source.

BRICKNOTE: You can buy ordinary household bricks for between £40 and £50 a thousand. The 120 bricks the Tate bought would be enough to build a large fireproof moneybox.¹⁰

The Mirror, of course, neglected the possibility that *Equivalent VIII* might be valued differently by members of the artworld to whom it had no utilitarian purpose or value. However, this idea was in turn rejected by the popular Press who declared in unison that *these* bricks were insufficiently wrought to qualify for art status, exhibiting no evidence of their maker's 'subjectivity'.

Whichever way you look at Britain's latest work of art...

WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH

How the Tate dropped 120 bricks¹¹

On the whole, these comments were predicated on the supposition that artworks are organised by and around an identifiable subject which may be identified by the viewer. In Andre's sculpture, the opposite was true, there was nothing to reveal: "People expect art to be mystifying. Mine isn't."¹² If sculpture traditionally required a spectator who was willing to become engaged in intense and relatively sustained viewing activity, Andre again invited the very opposite, his work merely required a (disapproving?) glance.¹³ This refusal to meet ideological requirements to think in terms of categories - 'completed' works produced in 'definable' materials - generated a certain anxiety in viewers. The expectation of an explanation, is that all anxiety will be quelled. No explanation was granted, closure was denied.¹⁴

¹⁰PHILIP MELLOR, "Whichever way you look at Britain's latest work of art... WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH: How the Tate dropped 120 bricks", *Daily Mirror*, No. 22410, Monday February 16th, Mirror Group, p1.

¹¹MELLOR, p1.

¹²CARL ANDRE IN PETER STAFFORD, "Brick Sculpture Not the Original, Artists Confirms", *The Times*, February 18th 1976, p5.

¹³See WILLIAM FEAVER, "A Brick is a Brick is a Brick...", *Vogue*, April 1976.

¹⁴Of the numerous articles which appeared in the British press on the 16th February 1976, most carried headlines which pointed to this factor. ANON. "Gallery Stonewalls Bricks Buy", *Evening Standard*; ANON. "Tate Gallery Silent on Price of Artistic Pile of Bricks", *Daily Telegraph*; ANON. "Cost of Tate's Brick Buy Still Secret", *South Wales Argus*; ANON. "The Tate's Brick Wall of Silence", *The News Portsmouth*; ANON. "Tate Stays Silent on Brick Buy", *Jersey Evening Post*; and ANON. "Gallery Stonewalling", *Western Evening News* all emphasised the Tate's unwillingness to explain, thereby suggesting that they *had* no explanation. Despite the accusatory tone, such headlines left the matter open for discussion the following day, giving the Tate some opportunity to explain its actions. A smaller number of newspapers, however, chose to stress financial motives for the silence - ANON. "Tate Gallery Silent on Price of Artistic Pile of Bricks", *Daily Telegraph*, February 16th 1976 - encouraging and channelling public outrage against excessive public spending by closing off the aesthetic possibilities of the debate. It wasn't really of any importance whether or not the work *was* 'rubbish', just so long as it was *cheap* rubbish. With most papers primarily exploiting the 'outrage' and sense of anxiety as a means

The artist and purchasers were thus seen to be guilty of charlatanism and collusion in order to achieve fame and fortune. Following this, a plethora of new offending 'modern' artworks were met with the press' contempt on the grounds that they spoke in the profane language of unsanctioned materials, events or processes. "Much of the press criticism used Andre's work as a pretext for an attack on modern art in general because it appeared, like the emperor's new clothes, to adopt incomprehensible strategies in order wilfully to confound common sense and popular taste."¹⁵

Much of this is assumed yet is startlingly implicit in the Philip Mellor's description of Andre's work as "dropped bricks" or "rubbish", words which suggest that the artist has failed to arrange his materials. Of course, it is often the case that dropped bricks *are* rubbish. Andre, however, arranged for his bricks to be set out in a pre-ordained manner and to be protected by Gallery security, facts which announce a maker's involvement, even if in a lesser capacity than that expected by the popular press. The extent to which the Tate Gallery's almost fetishistic relationship with the bricks themselves underscored this is, however, a matter for concern. The first showing of the *Equivalents Series*, was in 1966 at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. The Tate did not approach Andre until 1972, when it was thought that his work might constitute a 'classic' of minimalist art fit for Britain's national collection. That the Tate purchased a 1969 're-construction' of *Equivalent VIII*, rather than the installation as a whole, suggests that they also failed to understand Andre's work, seeing the bricks as individual

of boosting sales in the slack post-Christmas period, *The Sun* saw the opportunity for an 'exclusive', claiming that "£6,000 Brick Pile Starts Art Row", *The Sun*, February 16th 1976, despite the fact that the purchase price had not been disclosed. *The Sun* most successfully closed off the reading, leading to numerous Chinese whispers relating to the Tate's expenditure, the more wildly inaccurate, the more papers sold. It was over three months before the spending issues were analysed in perspective: "the more self-consciously *avant-garde* the creative manifestation, the more certain it is that there will be a proportionately high contribution from public funds. I say 'proportionately' because, in fact, the total sum paid from the official arts budget to the *avant-garde* is small. It is almost nothing, in comparison to the great sums given to museums as a whole, or to the great 'official' cultural enterprises, such as the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, the National Theatre, and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Even the Tate, which is our flagship gallery of modern art, spends only a tiny part of the funds available to it on work which should be classified *avant-garde*. The rest goes on buying work for the British collection (also a gallery responsibility), and in trying to fill gaps in the representation of classic modernism (at the time when post-Cubist works, for example, are amongst the most expensive things in the whole of the art market.)" EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH, "Brickbats for the Tate", *Encounter*, May 1976, p49.

"In 1976, I do remember feeling very strongly when it came to things like the bricks, on the one hand it defined the size of the problem in terms of the gap between what artists were doing, (and after all by that time Carl Andre was a fairly well established second-generation artist within the artworld), but in terms of the public awareness of art there was still an ocean to cross before it seemed they understood what these people were trying to do. At the same time what the Bricks also highlighted was a failure of nerve on the part of people who could have done something about it, for example the Tate Gallery, who could have seized that opportunity at very least to stage an exhibition which at the very least confronted the problem head on, and out of which a lot of people might well have gained a greater understanding of what Andre etc. were trying to do. But instead of that they retreated, there was a sense of fear, a sense of Oh God! we can't have controversy, we have to dampen it down." Interview with RICHARD CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

¹⁵BRIONY FER, "The modern in fragments", *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Yale University Press, 1993, p37.

sculptures rather than as inseparable parts of a site-specific whole.¹⁶ However, in an article written for *The Burlington Magazine*, Richard Morphet, then Deputy Keeper of the Modern Collection at the Tate, was clearly conscious of this important fact:

T. 1534 [The firebrick version of *Equivalent VIII* purchased by the Tate] consists of two identical layers, each consisting of sixty firebricks, arranged in a 6 by 10 configuration. It presents not only a specific shape made out of modules of a specific size and material, but also an assembly of units made to total 120. It cannot be re-arranged, but the concern it manifests with regularity and with a specific number provokes speculation in the spectator's mind as to alternative formulations of the same number. T.1534 is in fact one work from a series of sculptures called *Equivalents* in which, using identical bricks, each example presents the number 120 in a different two-layer arrangement ranging from one with an overall measurement of 5 by 13.5 by 180 inches to one of 5 by 54 by 45 inches. Despite its embodiment in quite elementary forms, the tension between an unchanging, reiterated volume and the sculptures' sharply varied shapes is mysterious. In every case, the bricks are stacked in two layers as a straightforward means of maintaining structural cohesion.¹⁷

It would therefore appear unusual for the Tate to have purchased only part of a work of art. As public reaction partially confirmed, the sculpture clearly did not function without its *Equivalents*. The only reason, then, for purchasing only one element of the second firebrick version of the *Equivalents* exhibition can have been that the Tate were trying to *save* taxpayers' money.¹⁸

The Tate's policy then comes under scrutiny in relation to the physical characteristics of the bricks themselves. After showing the work initially, Andre sold the original sandlime bricks back to the manufacturer in order to raise some money, as he was unable to find a buyer; "So

¹⁶The discussion which followed the Tate's controversial purchase revealed that there was little comprehension between the public and what the sculptor was trying to say, because there had been no opportunity to view a comprehensive exhibition of his work. This was remedied in March 1978 when the Whitechapel Gallery, London produced a retrospective (1959-76), which included a full reconstruction of the *Equivalent Series*. This strategy also failed to convince the public. On March 30th, Andre's *Cedar Piece* was pushed over by Reuben Routen, a 37 year old art student from Liverpool. He appeared in court charged with criminally damaging Andre's '£30,000 Wooden sculpture' with his face painted in several different colours.

¹⁷RICHARD MORPHET, "Carl Andre's Bricks", *Burlington Magazine*, Volume CXVIII, No. 884, November 1976, p763.

¹⁸Of course, the Tate also had to balance this concern with the pressures and demands of the art market: "The Tate waited four years before purchasing in 1973 its important Andre sculpture of 144 metal plates placed on the floor in a 12 by 12 square, which Andre made in 1969. Andre made six sculptures in this series, each in a different metal. The other five had already entered the collections of important museums in Europe and America, and the Tate's purchase thus represented its last chance of acquiring any of these six works. Variations on this kind of situation occur often." *ibid.*, p767.

the gallery didn't even get the original pile of bricks."¹⁹ *The Burlington Magazine* aped the tabloids with its April 1976 'Editorial':

Well, even T1534 is not the original brick sculpture that Carl Andre made in 1966: since no one wanted to buy it, the bricks were sent back to the works, and were not available when the Tate, six years later, wished to buy a replica. Andre had to make do with firebricks.

"From the comment this aroused, you would not have dreamed that it was absolutely traditional for a sculpture to occur in several examples, or that Duchamp had run the gauntlet with his ready-mades well over fifty years earlier."²⁰ However, it is not clear that Andre was entirely willing to engage with these problematic facts:

...I'm not interested in reproducing or adding to the number of works of a given kind that exist. But if others attempt to produce reconstructions, then these would not be art because art is not plagiarism.²¹

But why should people value this specific pile of bricks, or arrangement of steel plates, more than any other? Because that pile of bricks is my work, and if you want to get the authentic example or specimen of the work of Carl Andre then you must go to Carl Andre and buy it. I have a monopoly supply. Now this supply can be forged or plagiarised, but then one would be dealing with the work of a forger or plagiarist. This is very simple. There is less startling matter there than meets the eye. But we generally tend to overvalue money and undervalue art.²²

Hence, although the Tate purchasers could easily have acquired the bricks inexpensively from a builder's yard in London (as the tabloids loved to point out), they were compelled to purchase a reconstruction of the sculpture made of fire-bricks from the John Weber Gallery in New York, for an undisclosed sum.²³ It is therefore pertinent to examine questions of attribution and nomenclature. Does the Tate own *Equivalent VIII*, a second version of *Equivalent VIII*, an artist's impression of *Equivalent VIII*, Tate Gallery No. T.1534, or 'a pile of firebricks'?

In Andre's opinion, art is inspired by matter and not by ideas. T.1534 in its first (destroyed) form was inspired by one particular brick. Along with other works in the same *Equivalents* series, it was reconstituted three years later using a different brick.

¹⁹MELLOR, p1. See also PETER STAFFORD, "Brick Sculpture Not the Original, Artists Confirms", *The Times*, February 18th 1976.

²⁰PAT GILMOUR, "Trivialisation of Art by the Press", *Arts Review*, January 1977, p50. In Rosalind Krauss' words, Andre's bricks were 'reproductions without originals'.

²¹ANDRE in FULLER, p123-124.

²²ibid. p123.

²³"How much did the Tate pay for *Equivalent VIII*? I think it was £4000. Something like that. They couldn't have got an Andre for less." ibid. p122.

It is thus part of the second *Equivalents* series, intimately related to the first but distinct from it. The type of brick employed in T.1534 was no less carefully selected than that employed in its first version, and unless made of this kind of brick, T.1534 does not exist. Thus physically, as well as an idea, it is, in its own right, an important work by Carl Andre.²⁴

Morphet attempted to 'compel our conviction' in the Tate Bricks by fusing the materials purchased by the Tate to the decisions of an author. Notwithstanding the reflex-claims of post-structuralist theory, his claims are erroneous for a number of reasons. If T.1534, by definition, *are* the set of firebricks owned by the Tate Gallery, then *Equivalent VIII* must have *been* a set of sand lime bricks. T.1534 may ape the form of *Equivalent VIII* but its physical make-up is clearly different, for, as Morphet rightly claimed, it would not be T.1534 were it not made of firebricks. However, to claim that T.1534 had a "first (destroyed) form" in *Equivalent VIII*, is to admit that the physicality of both versions of the *Equivalents* is not of primary importance. This is reinforced by the fact that when Andre was unable to purchase sandlime bricks for the second version of his work, he 'made do' with firebricks. Were the physical characteristics of the *Equivalents* concept of primary importance, Andre would not have chosen to produce a simulation of it. As such it is *not* entirely clear that T.1534 is physically, "in its own right, an important work by Carl Andre", despite what Morphet or even Andre might claim to the contrary.

To complicate matters, when T.1534 was 'destroyed' by being sprayed with blue food colouring on February 23rd 1976 by Peter Stowell-Phillips an amateur painter from London, the firebricks were not replaced.²⁵ Instead the conservation department were required to follow Morphet's thesis, devoting much time and expense of cleaning them, further infuriating taxpaying newspaper readers. To make matters worse, Andre agreed with the Tate's actions:

²⁴MORPHET, p764.

²⁵See ANON. "Tate Bricks Disfigured", *The Times*, 24th February 1976, p1. Stowell-Phillips had no association with the left-wing assaults on culture which were perpetrated at the turn of the 70s, one of the most famous being The Angry Brigade's bombing *Biba* for having manufactured lifestyles. Stowell-Phillips did not intend to make the populace aware of the repressive patriarchal structure of society, nor did he seek to condemn the passive experience of the consumer economy. As he attempted to disfigure the 'Tate Bricks' he was reported to have shouted 'I am a taxpayer and I'm incensed that this pile of bricks was bought with public money.' Rather than being enraged at this art attack, onlookers applauded. Despite being reported as fact by much of the press, this much was hearsay. The manner in which state power lay in a web of controls over the masses became clearer in the next few days when Stowell-Phillips spoke to reporters of how he had 'felt compelled to do it'. Rather conveniently, no permanent damage was done to the 'Tate Bricks' and Stowell-Phillips was not charged. Recently, artists who have had their works attacked in Britain have benefited from instant mythology, as having your art attacked virtually ensures its entry into the official annals of British Art History. In 1994 Damien Hirst's *Away from the Flock* (subsequently included in *Sensation*) was 'improved' by an artist with blue ink while on display in *Some Went Mad Some Ran Away* at the Serpentine. In 1997 Marcus Harvey's *Myra*, on display at *Sensation* in the Royal Academy was attacked with red and blue ink by two 'artists'. In all, the Tate Bricks scandal set the agenda for all subsequent engineered British art scandals. See: ANON. "Anatomy of a Small Sensation", *The Times*, February 19th 1976.

*You once said, 'my works are in a constant state of change. I'm not interested in reaching an ideal state with my work. As people walk on them, as the steel rusts, as the brick crumbles, the materials weather and the work becomes its own record of everything that's happened to it.' Do you therefore disapprove the Tate's decision to remove the ink-stain from the bricks? I approve of the removal of it. That statement was not meant to refer to vandalism, but to the fact that I do not polish metal plates. [...] Isn't vandalism part of history, too? Vandalism is part of history, but then so is Auschwitz. That does not mean we should approve and continue the practice.*²⁶

This futile effort to copyright and legitimise Andre's 'sculpture' and therefore gain 'value for the taxpayers' money backfired appropriately. Soon the Tate was reeling under a barrage of trite artworks sent in by members of the public. Significantly, the public echoed the press' utilitarian attack on Andre's sculpture by sending objects which were designed for domestic tasks (vacuum cleaners) or for the workplace (bricks, paper clips, string). "Some people have even sent in drawings by their children and one man offered a photograph of a filing cabinet with a row of coffee cups on top. [...] Mr. Richard Morphet said 'None of their objects are ones we wish to consider as acquisitions to the permanent collection.'"²⁷ Having maintained the illusion that the 'Tate Bricks' were (incontestably) Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, the Tate was now forced to consider a plethora of faux-dada objects and return each of them by post at considerable expense (to the taxpayer). That the Tate were wrongly attached to the notion of Andre's work being an expensive and "unique acquisition"²⁸, is concluded by the fact that the T.1534 firebricks continue to be housed in individual velvet-lined boxes stored in the Tate archive.

Significantly, Andre claimed that the only difference between his bricks and ordinary bricks was his "self-conscious intent to have made it art."²⁹ In this, the artist revealed himself to be an exponent of proceduralism, the notion that art is produced according to certain rules and procedures, and defined in relation to social institutions. Traditional aesthetics were functionalist, explaining objects to be artworks as a result of performing particular functions (perhaps giving us a feeling of elation). Andre, in contrast, did not see art as a series of autonomous objects, but as a process resulting from tradition, a phenomenon caught up in a web of intertextuality. This may help to explain the generally negative reaction to his work. To some extent, Andre's viewers were required to become connoisseurs given that they needed to be equipped to relate the maximum number of strange objects being proposed as artworks, to an already acknowledged group of art objects by means of a theoretical claim about the nature

²⁶ANDRE in FULLER, p117.

²⁷ANON. *The Journal*, 23 February 1976.

²⁸MELLOR, p1.

²⁹ANDRE in FULLER, p124.

or value of art. This meant that when presenting his latest artworks to the public, Andre could not simply claim 'what you see is what you see' since his proceduralism ruled out the 'innocent eye'. As such, it might be argued, Andre's work *was* not merely mystifying, but was *entirely reliant upon mystification*:

...Carl Andre, who is fond of analogising his work with shoe-making, talking about being an 'art-worker' and professing Marxism, could never allow these convictions to extend beyond his taste for physical materials, with which he wrongly associates the proletariat. [...] If there is a radical side to Andre's work, it is not in his vector diagrams which, like so many diagrams drawn by professed artistic radicals, indicate 'Art' and 'Society' as differing forces and hope for some vague point of divergence in pictorial representation. Rather it must be in exposing the naked economic injustice in Andre's ability to sell metal plates, produced by the appropriation of other men's labour, for a profit margin which verges on the ridiculous. [...] Art works can only signify social relations as symptoms.³⁰

A corollary of Andre's proceduralist view is that anyone with a conception of art, an understanding and application of art theory might create art, thereby fully democratising the 'profession' (by eliminating it as an arena of reified competence). As a Marxist, this was something that Andre sought to encourage and promote through his work. Yet, as an artisan and mercantile capitalist (selling 'unique' expensive commodities) it was something that he had to prevent, given that it would have destroyed his monopoly in the art market.³¹ Likewise, Morphet was more than willing to allow *Andre* to present himself as a 'democratised' artist (with the Tate's official seal of approval!), thereby ensuring that the Tate would appear to be at the forefront of proceduralist research. However, the Tate were unwilling to allow the full implications of proceduralism to run, since a completely democratised artworld would mean the end to the Tate's ostensible monopoly on deciding what constituted modern art fit for public consumption.

I see no reason why we shouldn't be primarily concerned with our own subculture, and just try to spread it a little bit. [...] The Government is backing my game, my passionate interest, and so long as I can continue to persuade them to do so, I will. I'm on to a good thing, and I would not dream of questioning it.³²

³⁰ROSETTA BROOKS, "Please, No Slogans", *Studio International*, (Art & Social Purpose), March/April 1976.

³¹"Carl Andre was recently quoted as saying that when he visits art schools he asks for the ones who want to be artists to put their hands up: he then tells these to leave, saying: 'I wish to speak only to those people who *cannot prevent* themselves from being artists.'" ANDREW BRIGHTON and NICHOLAS M. PEARSON, "The 'Specialness' of Art and Artists", *Art Monthly*, Number 21, November 1978, p3.

³² MICHAEL COMPTON quoted in FULLER, "The Tate, The State and the English Tradition", *Studio International*, Volume 194, Number 988, 1/1978, p7.

Hence, the illusion had to be maintained that the act of conferral of art status is an exercise of authority vested in socially defined roles, in order that the brokers of the artworld could continue to provide explanations of *who* can confer art status on *what* and *when*.



Figure 1.2 This satirical Heineken Advertisement attaches the notion of shamanism to Andre's work, despite his iconoclastic intentions.

It is true to say that without logical constraints on art making and arthood, the concepts 'artist' and 'arthood' are rendered vacuous. The contextual determinism necessary to sustain the concept of art implies logical constraints, and if there are to be such constraints, then it must be possible for someone to say 'it's art' and be wrong. As such, Andre and Morphet both subtly implied that the public were merely 'making noise' rather than producing meaningful artistic statements. However, in addition to being a particularly objectionable example of the intentional fallacy, this causes problems in relation to the Tate's acquisition of works by anti-art groups who were as intent on mocking the artworld as the British working and middle-classes (albeit for different reasons and ends). A definition of art in which assaults on official museum culture are clear-cut instances of art is a definition in which they lose their point, that being to question the need for the fetishisation of creativity. Moreover, there is little reason to believe, as Andre and Morphet did, that the artworld is structured to a degree that it might be viewed plausibly as an informal institution, since it does not hold at any given time, a *single* given theory of art (whereas Institutions such as the Police are required to uphold 'The Law'). The idea that Andre or the Tate *are* authorities on art is nothing other than a mutually beneficial impression created by them, which ultimately cannot be proven to be either true or false.

Hence, the best justification Morphet had for refusing to consider the public's faux-dada objects as acquisitions for the permanent collection was that members of the public were not authority figures within the artworld, (his friends?)³³ Of course, they could always *become* artists, but not until they had proven themselves to those already in positions of power; *the* archetypal capitalist-paternalist denial of democratic socialism and human potentiality. Such

³³"Art is nothing over and above what has been socially established as art. What is called art in our society is art regardless of what future societies call art and, therefore, the supposition... that our society might have got the art-list wrong assumes, wrongly, that there is something to get right or wrong. The only mistake that can be made is one of not knowing the conventions of society (i.e. not knowing what society calls art." ROGER TAYLOR, *Art, An Enemy of the People*, Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1978, p49-50.

fascistic policies were particularly pertinent in Britain during 1976. Given that Andre's work made it difficult to define art semantically (in terms of what it is not), 'art' risked becoming a defunct term with little or no classificatory force. Hence, the only way to avoid this was to re-define the production of art economically, that is, by nurturing class divisions. Andre was out of his depth:

...in England the Queen can knight her horse trainer or The Beatles, and that's one way of conveying value. In the United States there is no way of conveying value except with money. I think this is why British artists get less for their work than American artists. Americans are used to conveying value with money. In a way it makes American society more vulgar, simple and clear. How much money you have determines your social position. It's much less ambiguous. I find it extraordinarily difficult to follow the intra-class wars that go on in English drawing rooms.³⁴

As I will demonstrate, the Tate Bricks scandal primarily served to bolster the power and authority of professional members of the artworld, particularly those who understood its politics and were willing to play the power games:

I suppose it might have done. I don't remember thinking that at the time. I remember being very disturbed by the violence of the reaction and the way that these tabloid newspapers would.... we've got used to it now, it's become common currency, we actually have a generation of artists who actually enjoy being crucified by tabloid headlines and almost regard it as part of the work. It raises different issues I think. But at that time I don't remember thinking this is helping, but it drew attention in the most dramatic way imaginable.³⁵

As Richard Cork (tacitly) points out, the scandal drew attention to a number of Minimalist issues in a manner which had previously been denied. Indeed, when all of this is judged against the reception of work by other American minimalists, Andre's work appears to have been a great success. Ten years earlier in "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," Robert Morris had written:

Some of the new work has expanded the terms of sculpture by a more emphatic focusing on the very conditions under which certain kinds of objects are seen. The object itself is carefully placed in these new conditions to be but one of the terms.³⁶

The idea that minimalist sculpture might be no more or less important than any other 'term' in a gallery was taken literally in the debacle surrounding Andre's work. The fact that most of the response to the work was negative, was, in minimalist terms, highly beneficial, even desirable.

³⁴ANDRE IN FULLER, p124-125.

³⁵Interview with RICHARD CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

³⁶ROBERT MORRIS, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum*, Vol. 5. No. 2, October 1966, p20-23.

By rejecting the idea that sculpture should focus primarily on the conditions in which it is seen, the public were tacitly forced to critically interrogate the 'condition of sculpture' against their will. Yet during 1976, such phenomenological musings seem misplaced. Minimalists such as Andre were at last forced to consider that their abstract introspections might spill out of the artworld and into the party political area. In 1966, Morris could still claim that the "object has not become less important. It has merely become less *self* important."³⁷ For Andre in 1976, however, the possibility that the bricks *debacle* was of considerably more interest than T.1534 was a very real one. Indeed it was precisely this point which was raised by Andre when he produced a homage to his detractors for the first edition of *Art Monthly*.³⁸ We might go so far as to argue that the production of an atmosphere of crisis was also a necessary, and greatly underestimated, component of the minimalist project:

Years ago, I was quoted as saying art is what we do and culture is what is done to us and our art. Works of art, any human concern that's shared by many people, becomes enriched by the sum of those concerns which can never be identical with each other. But everyone says that bricks cannot stand by themselves, they need an argument, or line of work, to surround them. I absolutely agree; but the *Venus de Milo* would just be a stone woman if nobody knew about sculpture.³⁹

Despite Andre's posthumous recognition of situational aesthetics, it seems that a substantial number of people responsible for bringing and keeping the T.1534 firebricks at the Tate were unable to confirm their true significance. In an important sense, therefore, the press were right to claim that this was a case of the emperor's new clothes. This is not to claim belated critical points for the popular press, for they had a very different agenda. Andre claimed that the "British public doesn't have much to do with art", "because of the economically determined conditions of society. There's no money for the great capitalists in having people interested in art. There's money in having them interested in television."⁴⁰

However, as always, most newspapers wanted to cash in on the craze for art bashing. Whole columns were clearly lifted from one newspaper to another without any facts being checked. Andre was called Colin, Carle, Karl and Col. while photographers raced to photograph local bricklayers at work. Nevertheless, as John A. Walker has pointed out, there was something which seemed to break with the numbing familiarity of such attacks: "Normally the cultural divide between the popular press and avant-garde art circles is so wide that neither

³⁷ibid.

³⁸CARL ANDRE, "The Bricks Abstract", *Art Monthly*, No. 1, October 1976, p24. This abstract, containing a number of comments on the affair selected by Andre, was presented in table form, strongly resembling Andre's concrete poetry.

³⁹ANDRE in FULLER, p117.

⁴⁰ibid., p112.

acknowledges the existence of the other.”⁴¹ Of course, the reactionary sectors of the tabloid press remained unconcerned with high art, despite their pretence to defend ‘traditional’ notions of artistic expression and communicability.⁴² Their concern was that, in sanctioning useless activities, the Tate Gallery could be cast as *the* right-wing nightmare vision of bureaucratic socialism which would infuriate the popular imagination.

In condemning the Andre sculpture the popular press was able to pander to the philistinism of its readers in respect of modern art, while simultaneously gaining moral kudos as the watchdog of the public purse.⁴³

These events helped to focus the public’s attention on current debates concerning the benefits of monetarist economic planning. Throughout the seventies, monetarists had been arguing that while Keynesianism might secure full employment, it did so at the expense of inducing higher inflation and taxation both of which impaired growth. A key ideological weapon of monetarist thinkers - such as Alfred Sherman, Director of the Conservative Party’s Centre for Policy Studies⁴⁴ - was to encourage people to believe that more was being spent on public services without any noticeable benefits. Although monetarists found their most powerful supporter with the election of Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, their ideas were keenly implemented by the Labour Government in the last years of Harold Wilson’s premiership.

The fourfold increase in oil prices early in 1974 entailed a sharp reduction in living standards in all oil importing countries. In Britain the oil crisis hit an economy all ready out of

⁴¹JOHN A. WALKER, “The Mass Media Use Art”, *Art in the Age of Mass Media*, Pluto Press, London, p69.

⁴²“...things like Andre’s bricks maintain links with popular culture. Our tabloid newspapers can still get in a lather about them; comics on prime-time TV still feel it worthwhile to make them the subject of jokes, on the assumption that the lowliest lager lout will somehow know what is being derided. In America the tabloid you buy from the rack by the supermarket checkout will never have anything about Andre or anyone like him. The lead story will be Rosanne’s divorce, or ‘My mother-in-law was raped by a little green alien.’ No populist politician, not even Pat Buchanan, is ever going to make political capital out of minimal art.” EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH, “The Art of Bricklaying”, *Art Review*, April 1996, p34-35.

⁴³WALKER, p69.

⁴⁴“The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), an early think tank, was actually a product of the Heath administration. He had let it find a pitch within the party, ostensibly to do some non-threatening research into things like the differences between the European and Japanese economies but in reality to give Sir Keith Joseph something safe to do. Under his leadership, however, the CPS started to postulate all kinds of weird experiments on the British economy and British society. By 1974, the organisation was acting as a greenhouse for the new Tory Party, and an entirely new philosophy was growing up in the heart of the old one. By the time Mrs. Thatcher was installed, the CPS was in absolutely full flow, churning out papers and memoranda and speeches and what have you, all of them arguing for a massive shift to the Right, a shift in favour of free-market economics, monetary controls and individual liberties.” PETER YORK, “Pioneers”, *Peter York’s Eighties*, BBC Books, 1995, p10.

control due to huge public sector pay demands designed to squeeze Edward Heath's Conservative Government out of power. On being returned to Government in October 1974, Wilson decided to recant on Labour's radical socialist election promises, increasing public spending by 9% over the next year while the rest of Europe was deflating, while meeting 30% pay demands for power workers, miners and railwaymen in July 1975. The hyperinflation created by this response actually served the interests of Labour's right-wing, since it allowed the economy to deteriorate to the point when the need for their reactionary policies could be blamed on outside agents such as the unions and the oil crisis. The expected economic results were announced in the autumn of 1975 when the Treasury produced the National Income Forecast which showed the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement for 1975-76 rising from £9 billion to £12 billion, (the debt in 1970 had been zero). The Labour Right were quick to act.⁴⁵ In January 1976, the Chancellor Denis Healey adopted a tough monetary policy in order to concentrate on growth and the battle against inflation by making a £3.5 billion cut in public spending, and agreeing a pay accord with the unions. In order to muster ideological support for this 'emergency' measure the Government argued that inflation was an enemy of democratic socialism since it placed a greater burden on the poor.

However, it soon became apparent that the monetarist battle against inflation meant abandoning the consensus commitment to full employment set out in the Conservative Government's 1944 White Paper on employment policy.⁴⁶ Moreover, those who remained in work were faced with a screw down on the rate of wage increases which seemed to be aimed primarily at restoring private sector profitability.⁴⁷ In the context of such unpopular economic 'medicine', the Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror*'s assault on the Tate Gallery's decision to display Andre's rubbish could be seen to constitute a Machiavellian manoeuvre designed to favour the Labour Right. On the one hand it underlined an area desperately in 'need' of disciplinary cuts in public expenditure, cuts which would be vivaciously welcomed by the majority of the populace; on the other hand, it diverted the healthy, employed sections of the populace from the significant effects that public expenditure cuts would have on those who relied on the Welfare State. Given that the implication of monetarist policies quickly resulted

⁴⁵"Above all, the New Right benefited from exploiting fears of a drift towards totalitarian socialism. The apparently unstoppable growth of union power and the 'hard' Left both within and outside parliament (witness the Trades Union Congress' invitation to the head of KGB to its 1976 conference, the emergence of the Militant Tendency and the fourfold growth in membership of the International Socialists between 1974) provoked spectacular defections from Left to Right in the decade - most notoriously Paul Johnson, Bernard Levin and ex-Labour Ministers Lord Chalfont." BART MOORE-GILBERT, "Cultural Closure or Post-Avantgardism", *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?*, Routledge, London, 1994, p5.

⁴⁶Inflation was brought down to a single-figure rate by the spring of 1978.

⁴⁷This eventually led to the 1978 pay dispute with the unions which ended in the 'winter of discontent'.

in direct and substantial increases in unemployment, it is hardly surprising to find that art scandals came to play an increasingly important part in tabloid politics during 1976.

An important part of the success of this tactical manoeuvre by Labour monetarists lay in its capacity to separate any perceived negative effects of monetarist policy (such as rising unemployment) from apparent successes (such as putting a stop to inflation and the public funding of 'rubbish' art). The public artworld provided an ideal scapegoat in relation to this model since it was a quasi-autonomous governmental organisation (Quango).⁴⁸ This meant that popular arts supported by the Arts Council could be claimed as benefiting from Labour's new monetarist policies, since it was a Governmental organisation. On the other hand the Arts Council could be held responsible for unpopular, 'modern art' since it was, after all, (quasi)autonomous. Hugh Jenkins, then minister responsible for the arts, was said to have inquired into the purchase of the Tate Bricks, discussing the matter with senior officials of his department. Nothing transpired. Of course, severe cuts in funding or threats of an end to public subsidy would have forced the independent Trustees of the Tate Gallery to behave, but this would have left the Government without its pawns.

Despite the fact that they played *no* role in the purchase of the Tate Bricks (the Tate being funded directly by Whitehall) the Arts Council performed to plan, meeting the confounded objections of the non-artworld with an infuriatingly measured response. Taking his cue from feudal patronage, Roy Shaw sought to defend the Arts Council's role as an 'arts service', much like the NHS or Education Service, for the 90% of the population who would not otherwise come into contact with the arts. Later, in *The Arts and the People*, he wrote of his concern to extend "learning's golden gifts", a concern derived from his experience as a working-class boy, raised in a home totally devoid of any cultural influence (apart from music hall), who began to discover literature through public libraries and an adult education evening course.⁴⁹

For Shaw, the Arts Council was one hope of renewal and growth in an otherwise irredeemable 'mass-civilisation', a means of conserving the imaginative values and energies that transcend the mere instrumental reason which is the characteristic malaise of modern culture.⁵⁰ In this, Shaw was clearly working within the culturalist traditions of the Arts Council, an institution brought into being by the efforts of a newly professionalized

⁴⁸Despite many misleading headlines which suggested that the Arts were controlled directly by the government e.g. MICHAEL EVANS, "Sir Norman Drops 120 Bargain Bricks on the Tate", *Daily Express*, February 16th 1976. See also ANON. "Minister Hears How the Tate Bought a Pile of Bricks", *Financial Times*, February 17th 1976; and SIR NORMAN REID, "From the Director at the Tate Gallery: Bricks (letter)", *The Times*, February 20th 1976, p15.

⁴⁹ROY SHAW, "Introduction", *The Arts and the People*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1987, p9.

⁵⁰Such views owe much to the works of John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis. See MATTHEW ARNOLD, *Culture and Anarchy*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London.

intelligentsia as a result of the combined effects of cultural commodification on the one hand, and state sponsored education on the other. The Arts Council of Great Britain's first annual report of 1947 famously quotes Bloomsbury aesthete John Maynard Keynes:

The day is not far off when the Economic Problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and the arena of the heart and the head will be occupied, or re-occupied, by our real problems - the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion.⁵¹

As an institution, the Arts Council owed a great deal to culturalism, the British intellectual tradition fostered by critics such as Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams. Deliberately counterpoising the value of culture to the claims of utility, culturalists opted for state education as the mechanism by which culture might be preserved and extended as the centre of resistance to the driving imperatives of an increasingly mechanical and materialist civilisation.

The democratisation of the lifestyles of culturalist academics and the 'civilised ruling classes' who were their associates, were central to the post-war Labour Government's conception of a new society. Individualism and socialism were to be developed in tandem by democratising intellectual privilege. The Government used collective wealth to invest in a programme of education, and so, in the long run, replace the manual industrial economy of low wages and long hours with an intellectual post-industrial economy of short hours and high wages. In this, the Labour Government heralded a society not bound together by economic market contracts, but by citizenship. Rational autonomous individuals would be educated enough to understand that their high quality of life was dependent on supporting a generous level of public provision, allowing the gradual ascendancy of democratic socialism.⁵²

Gaining secure, intellectual employment from a state bureaucracy due to improved and subsidised opportunity, Shaw was clearly a model 'citizen'. As such, his ideas should not simply be seen as a latest moralistic twist in the story of the high cultural refusal of the popular pleasures of material civilisation: "All the arts are a source of pleasure but some pleasures are of a higher quality and not simply of greater quantity than others."⁵³ Shaw's thoughts were predicated on the rationalist division between the affective and the cognitive, for they

⁵¹See: JANET MINIHAN, *The Nationalisation of Culture - The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1977.

⁵²"The complex history of avant-garde art can be read as the history of a crisis of high imaginative culture. A crisis brought on in reflective culture by the rise of the New Class and by the modern idea of progress, that is, the secular idea of moral and social advance through the growth of instrumental knowledge." ANDREW BRIGHTON, "Art Currency", *Current Affairs: British Painting and Sculpture in the 1980s*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford and The British Council, 1987, p14. See also: ALIVIN W. GOULDNER, *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, Macmillan, London, 1979.

⁵³SHAW, "What use are the Arts?", p20.

prioritised the intellectual labour of thinking over the pleasure of the text. For Shaw, as for most democratic socialists, the individual's knowledgeable "will to form" had to be publicly legitimated and controlled in order to ensure its highly worthwhile social benefits:

Despite Mrs. Thatcher's belief in "Victorian values", her government's attitude to education and the arts suggests that she is not aware, as William Gladstone was, that "The higher instruments of human cultivation are also the ultimate guarantees of public order."⁵⁴

Such an attitude, it would seem, had become increasingly incompatible with much state-sponsored art in the mid-seventies. Again, the question arises as to whether or not it was *deliberately* incompatible. Could the lower instruments of human depravity also be a guarantee of public order?



Figure 1.3 *Daily Mail*, 19th October 1976. This paper was soon reproduced on the cover of Throbbing Gristle's *Very Friendly* LP Sleeve.

In the Spring of 1976, the Chancellor was forced to adopt an even stricter economic stance on expenditure, forcing him to abandon some of Labour's policy commitments in the public services. In February, the month in which Andre's bricks were first unveiled, the Treasury decided to secure a fall in the pound in order to make sterling more competitive. The Bank of England's poor handling of this manoeuvre precipitated a crisis in the pound between March and April 1976 in which nearly a third of Britain official reserves were spent supporting the falling currency. Following the International Monetary Fund crisis⁵⁵ in the autumn of

⁵⁴ibid., p25.

⁵⁵Following the Bank of England's disastrous attempt to devalue the pound, the Labour administration applied for an IMF loan in order to prevent more cuts in public spending. The IMF, however, asked for cuts of £5 billion in public expenditure in order to secure this loan. Callaghan managed to force through £2 billion in cuts, thereby ensuring that the IMF would grant a loan, for fear that they would appear to be responsible for economic ruin if they failed to do so. It was soon proved that the IMF were intent on destroying left-wing governments. In 1977 it asked the USA, Germany, Japan and Britain (who refused) to create a foreign exchange crisis, to withhold aid to the socialist Government of Portugal, thereby permitting the harsh IMF economic prescriptions which soon allowed the far Right back into power. See KATHLEEN BURK and ALEC CAIRNCROSS, *'Goodbye Great Britain': The 1976 IMF Crisis*, Yale, London, 1992.

1976, policies now characterised as Thatcherite were fully launched by Callaghan who secured a reduction of £2 billion in public spending over the next two years.

On the 18th of October 1976, in the middle of IMF crisis, COUM Transmission's *Prostitution* opened at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, a retrospective exhibition guaranteed to dislocate human cultivation and public order. Given this it is hardly surprising that although "Prostitution" ran for only eight days and filled just one room the coverage it received was out of all proportion to its modest size. It was the subject of at least 100 newspaper and magazine articles and questions were asked in parliament."⁵⁶ The infamous exhibition, which featured pornography, used tampons and maggots, was most famously met with a furious attack by veteran right-winger Nicholas Fairbairn - QC and MP for Kinross and West Perthshire - in language somewhat akin to the Arts Council's defence of 'cultural value':

It's a sickening outrage, Sadistic, Obscene, Evil. [...] The Arts Council must be scrapped after this. [...] Public money is being wasted here to destroy the morality of our society. These people are the wreckers of civilisation. They want to advance decadence.⁵⁷

"...like all modern exhibitions it was an excuse for exhibitionism by every crank, queer, squint and ass in the business." Fairbairn went on to lead the Tory call to "abolish the spooks with their soft-belt intellectual arrogance", the art bureaucracy "anxious to promote every swill-bin attitude they can to denigrate language, meaning and thought."⁵⁸

That Fairbairn should have mimicked some of the Arts Council's promotional rhetoric while criticising the activities it endorsed should come as no surprise. Fairbairn, like the Arts Council, clearly endorsed the notion of art as the cultural activity of the educated classes, the class to which Fairbairn, the quintessential representative of the Tory old guard, felt he belonged. However, even such incongruous work could be defended on Fairbairn's grounds in that it offered the educated modernist cognoscenti a brief, well-charted escapade into anarchism. Indeed, this was precisely the position of the artistic director of the Institute of

⁵⁶SIMON FORD, "Doing P-Orridge", *Art Monthly*, June 1996, No. 197, p9. A similar number of articles were generated by the Bricks debacle.

⁵⁷NICHOLAS FAIRBAIRN in THOMSON PRENTICE, "Adults only art show angers and MP", *Daily Mail*, Tuesday 19th October 1976, p1.

⁵⁸NICHOLAS FAIRBAIRN in TISDALL, p85.

Contemporary Art: "The arts in this country are still dominated by middle-class attitudes. This has got to be broken down."⁵⁹ Broken down, perhaps, but not eradicated.

Confronted with such liberal curatorial practices, it has recently become customary for critical art historians to argue that - unlike the work of modernists such as Manet, Picasso and Pollock - the new art of the mid 1970s did not force a new set of critics to adopt a new way of seeing since it had already been publicly legitimated by educated figures:

...the objections raised by columnists in the popular Press are quite irrelevant, because the critical and curatorial success of [Andre's] the work as modern art was achieved quite independently of such reservations (where originally, as in the case of [Manet's] *Olympia*, [...] a sense of the modern was constructed, to a certain extent, out of the commentaries of critics).⁶⁰

While this comprehensive claim might elucidate one possible difference between modernist and postmodernist artworlds, its wider implications remain to be judged against the specific cultural and political contradictions which took place in *this* country around the question of cultural and economic paternalism during the 1970s.

Despite (or because of) their leftist sympathies, it might be claimed that much of the late modernist cognoscenti of the mid-1970s had deliberately effected an exaggeration or reversal of the Arts Council's original culturalist aims, using public money with the specific intent of *offending* (as opposed to 'altering') the public sensibility. Such an argument could be countered by the fact that COUM Transmissions had consistently aimed to make art more popular by undermining the mass-media's manipulative sensationalism, while seeking more 'direct' forms of experience.⁶¹ Yet any critical potential of COUM's work was in turn eroded by the common understanding fabricated by cultural administrators and the press, that the opposing face of the culturalist status quo was a monetarist mirror image. COUM's assault on culturalist mystification, therefore, inadvertently aided the cause of monetarist 'modernisers' of the Labour Right who were, after all, the producers of the powerful media sensationalism which COUM rallied against.

The assault on culturalism rapidly become a mausoleum for the institutionalised avant-garde, who were in an impossible position whereby they could not have their negations and

⁵⁹ TED LITTLE (Director of the ICA) in THOMSON PRENTICE, "Adults only art show angers and MP", *Daily Mail*, Tuesday 19th October 1976, p1. Roy Shaw, however, condemned the exhibition: "It is my personal view that this is not the kind of thing which public money should be used for." in RICHARD CORK "Richard Cork's 1976 Art Review", *Evening Standard*, 30th December 1976. This is clearly compatible with Shaw's democratic socialism, his reluctance to bow to monetarist pressure. For a right wing take on the public subsidy issue see "Protests at the use of public money for Contemporary Arts Exhibition", *The Times*, October 22nd 1976.

⁶⁰FER, "The Modern in Fragments", p43.

⁶¹See Chapter 13: *Guaranteed Disappointment*.

their politics too. One of the few avant-garde groups to recognise this were COUM, who used the opening night of the *Prostitution* exhibition to abruptly abandon the artworld, re-launching themselves as the industrial band Throbbing Gristle.⁶² With the artworld's ideals scarred by the 'failure' of the 70s late-avant-garde, new art historian T.J. Clark was soon able to 'convincingly' proclaim that

...the moment at which negation and refutation becomes simply too complete; they [the late avant-garde] erase what they meant to negate, and therefore no negation takes place; they refute their prototypes too effectively and the old dispositions are - sometimes literally - painted out; they 'no longer apply'.⁶³

Recognising the vast political potential of this situation were the New Right who chose to emphasise the 'patronising' manner in which the Art Council's cultural elitism seemed to deliberately denigrate and patronise the consumers of mass culture. Adopting the guise of social democrats, the New Right expressed concern that the paternalistic administration of culture was socially divisive; it drove a wedge between culture and society by treating culture as a separate ideal sphere and mass-consumer society as witness of a secular decline to be deplored from the critical standpoint of elite minority culture. In an ingenious rhetorical ploy, the New Right suggested that the 'culture industry' could be democratised simply by being turned over to the private sector. Such a proposal refuted Fairbairn's Thatcherite wish for a return to "Victorian Values"; in breaking down the Victorian distinction between utilitarianism and cultural life, the New Right mimicked Labour's social democratic policies.⁶⁴ However, the dissolution of such distinctions was not ultimately to be achieved by an Arnoldian educational emancipation of the labouring classes, but by the triumph of the New Right's 'economic rationalism'. Implicitly endorsing the reduction of objects of cultural preference to

⁶²Throbbing Gristle actually debuted at the AIR Gallery on Shaftsbury Avenue, London, in July 1976. A second appearance as TG followed at the Hat Fair in Winchester during August. Although the *Prostitution* show actually saw TG perform for the third time, the exhibition functioned more as an obituary than a retrospective, intended as it was to mark the official end of COUM as an art outfit, now reborn as industrial band Throbbing Gristle incorporating new member Chris Carter. Given their dadaesque roots, COUM have been acclaimed for (radically) withdrawing their artistic labour in the face of antagonistic capitalist consumption. However, in so doing, they lead the way for the entrepreneurial artists of the 1980s and 1990s. Having exhausted state subsidy, COUM simply became a private limited company (Industrial Records).

⁶³T. J. CLARK, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865", *Screen*, Spring 1980, p27.

⁶⁴Victorian values stress the virtues of authority, of hierarchy, of discipline of order, all of which were subverted by Thatcher's economic liberalism. Bowing to public pressure, Labour also proposed an end to the Arts Council's (quasi)autonomy, despite the fact that this would have meant losing one of the most powerful political weapons available to monetarist 'modernisers'. However, considerable ideological differences remained, with Labour (advised by Conrad Atkinson) proposing a democratic system of 'checks and balances' in order to make the Arts Council publicly accountable, and the Conservatives advocating the end of the Arts Council. See LABOUR PARTY, *The Arts and the People: Labour's Policy Towards the Arts*, London, 1977.

the level of commodities for sale in the market place, the New Right's consumption aesthetics owed more to the thematics of powerful business interests than to any inherent intellectual power or theoretical innovation.

In an important sense, then, the New Right was fully exploiting monetarist 'reforms' initiated by the Callaghan Government, arguing that a 'squeeze' on the cultural economy would create what Callaghan called 'a hole for expansion'. If proof were needed of the Right's intention to take advantage of Labour's monetarist drag act, it need only be stated that the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts (ABSA) was launched on the 12th of February 1976, only three days prior to Colin Simpson's article in *The Sunday Times* Business News. The Executive Committee ABSA included representatives of the Beecham Group, Doulton and Company, IBM (UK), Imperial Tobacco, Legal and General Assurance, Midland Bank, Perkins Engines Group and Phillips Industries, all powerful supporters of the Conservative Party.

It is ironic, (but not surprising), that the Labour Government should have supported ABSA's formation by providing a grant, for

...four years later Norman St John Stevas ran a campaign encouraging business sponsorship. He too gave ABSA a grant, of £25,000, and created a Committee of Honour to promote sponsorship. His successor as Arts Minister, Paul Channon, launched two publications of 1981 for business and the arts. Three years later, under Arts Minister Lord Gowrie, came more substantial support. The Business Sponsorship incentive scheme (BSIS) was launched in October 1984, through which the Government matches first time and existing sponsors when they put up new money for the arts. ABSA administers the scheme on behalf of the Arts Minister for an agreed fee.⁶⁵

However, given that there was a recession on, there was little danger of an over production of artworks, public or private. This was mere economic camouflage. Behind the New Right's social democratic cloak lay the more familiar criticism that the Arts Council were overly obsessed with abstract ideas, lifeless generalities which nowhere engaged with the vital, responsive, intuitive nature of 'authentic' cultural consumption. This suspicion of theoretical analysis was quintessentially Conservative, going back through Dr. Johnson's legendary appeal to experience over theory by kicking a stone to refute David Hume's philosophical scepticism. Partly as a corollary of this point, right-wingers argued that paternalism placed a stranglehold on the creative nature of the arts. Taking a monetarist materialist line, radical Conservatives argued that the higher level of taxation required for an effective public administrator for the arts left the public with less money to spend on their choice of art. What ought to be of primary importance in cultural life were those aspects which experience had been publicly 'endorsed'. What to endorse, therefore, should be decided by the public,⁶⁶ (in theory):

⁶⁵COLIN TWEEDY, "From Maecenas to Manager", *A Celebration of 10 Years' Business Sponsorship of the Arts*, Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, p14.

The artistic patron is not new - from Maecenas through to the Medicis and Mellon, we have seen that money and art go together. British examples range from the Earl of Southampton to the Tate family to Sir Charles Clore and the Sainsbury family. However, it is to America that we look for development of the business and arts movement which we in Britain now call business sponsorship of the arts.⁶⁷

Despite the obvious aim of ABSA to improve the *image* of big business, ("sponsorship of the arts is an important way business can be *seen* to be helping the community to flourish"),⁶⁸ the New Right claimed to be helping uncomplicated and brow-beaten 'ordinary' people to snip the cultural and economic ties that bound them. Conservatives thus deceptively pandered pragmatically to the 'I know what I like - I like what I know' attitude common to what they held to be the public conception of the arts. This aspect of Thatcherite policy constituted a more totalised assault on the related ideologies of culturalism and Keynesian macroeconomics than either COUM or the Labour government had envisaged. Monetarist Conservatives understood democracy as a 'market', with voters as buyers and politicians as sellers. The success of the Labour Party was, in their eyes, solely due to its promises of expensive policies. Such promises, however were inflationary, since they encouraged excessive expenditure leading to ever more exaggerated demands from voter-customers. As far as the arts were concerned, Labour offered an expensive, yet comprehensive service. What was perhaps unique in the case of the arts, however, was that this service was relatively unpopular with the electoral 'market' who tended to associate state subsidised culture with wealth and leisurely privilege. The Labour Government were perhaps to blame here, having clearly recanted on the democratic socialist aim of creating a society of highly educated, publicly spirited citizens. The Labour Government certainly sealed the fate of citizenship with their decision to centralise the institution of the market by implementing monetarist 'reforms' in 1976.⁶⁹ All that remained was for the New Right to capitalise upon Labour's Government's exploitation of the working class by pledging cuts across all remaining vestiges of Keynesian ideology.

The New Right were able to capitalise politically upon Labour's betrayal of the working class. Their profoundly anti-citizenship stance in relation to the important educational role of the Arts Council gave the false impression that they were the 'People's Party' - placing

⁶⁶See: DAVID ALEXANDER, *A Policy for the Arts: Just Cut Taxes*, Selsdon Group, London, 1978. As Minister for Education and Science in the 1970-74 Conservative Government, Margaret Thatcher had attempted to introduce museum charges, only to have her policy repealed by Harold Wilson's Government on his re-election in 1974.

⁶⁷TWEEDY, p9.

⁶⁸PRINCE CHARLES, *A Celebration of 10 Years' Business Sponsorship of the Arts*, p5. My emphasis.

⁶⁹See ERIC HOBSBAWM, "The Forward March of Labour Halted?", in M. JACQUES and F. MULHERN (Eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, Verso, London, 1978.

them in a powerful political position.⁷⁰ Shaw, meanwhile, continued to argue that Government should play a central role in developing an educated and enlightened taste in the arts - an overtly humanist concern designed to make people extraordinary. In this light, Shaw's Leavisite 'elitist' emphasis on a hierarchy of discriminating viewers was far from reactionary. Shaw implicitly rejected a consumption model of culture for a critical model of reception aesthetics - envisaging a society peopled not by more passive consumers but by connoisseurs who interpret: "uncultivated feelings and the irrationalism which often accompanies them are the stuff on which demagogues and dictators thrive."⁷¹

In contrast, the conservative consumption model implicitly rejected the possibility of aesthetic de-familiarisation; the claim that art might revitalise our jaded, routine, everyday habits of perception by forcing us to break with those habits and see things radically anew. Clearly the prospect of a critical, non-utilitarian culture ran counter to the radically scientific drift of conservative political interests. The New Right's central cultural policy tactic was suspiciously akin to the manner in which small companies in undeveloped countries turn the 'Uses of Illiteracy' to their advantage.⁷² Ensured by the Orwellian dictum 'ignorance is strength', the Conservative Party began to pledge a number of ingenious arts policy changes, cutting funding in a bid to move from the public back to the private sector. While the New Right and the ABSA argued that pluralism in arts subsidies would lead to a re-invigorated artworld, the institutionalised avant-garde knew that ending public subsidy would also end their 'critical' activities.

A number of critics, however, went further, arguing that the Arts Council, with its power to assimilate almost any object or gesture into the institutions of elite culture, had effectively neutralised the project of modernity. Indeed, even the possibility that a disintegrating modernism might radically alter or disrupt given structures of meaning was acceptable since it was by now a comprehensible strategy with its own history (dada, neo-dada, pop, minimalism, conceptualism, etc...) What irked many was that avant-garde quangos were collaborating on projects which 'failed to signify' for the sake of it. Divorced from the complex political milieu of the 'real world', this failure led artists to produce pseudo-avant-garde work, mimicking the reductive formal experiments of the authentic avant-garde while lacking their politically emancipatory imperative. Like the New Right's consumption aesthetics, the Arts

⁷⁰See CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL CENTRE, *The Arts - The way Forward*, London, 1978. Richard Cork claims that he was not entirely aware of the momentousness of the political events of 1976: "No I wasn't, no. I can see it much more clearly now of course than I did at the time. No there wasn't that sense. When it came to the Winter of Discontent, a bit later, you could very rapidly get the feeling that Old Labour was up and rambling. But, to be honest, could anybody could have imagined that this creature called Thatcher could have taken on in the way that she did. I certainly had no inkling of it really." Interview with RICHARD CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

⁷¹SHAW, p20.

⁷²See RICHARD HOGGART, *The Uses of Literacy*, 1957.

Council's cultural paternalism was seen to deny the possibility of aesthetic de-familiarisation, not through populism but through relativism. The Arts Council's power to legitimate events created a cult of myopic culture appreciators trained to routinely break with (unformed) habits. The suggestion was that the Arts Council's liberalism was supporting a small coterie of passive aesthetes rather than developing a mass society of cultured critics.

Although the avant-garde continued to conceive their work in a spirit of critique, it has since become a commonplace to note that their work was immediately consumed by an extensive institutional framework designed specifically to categorise and explain them. The relationship between an intellectually demanding culture, museums as institutions which legitimise this difficulty, and the corresponding industry of explanation, was quickly identified by a large number of producers and administrators of British art as the matter for practical and critical engagement. To remain independent of popular reservations was deemed suicidal, as the threat to their secure, intellectual employment now came *from* the (de-regulated) State. Culturalist 'citizens' who feared an end to their privileged status were therefore forced to contrive an impetus for the initial rejection of modernism in this country. As the New Right's populism gained in audibility, critics and artists who had professed an affinity with the political avant-garde pretended to jump from their sinking Arts Council ship. What they were in fact doing was ensuring that their status became both the object and content of their work, thereby guaranteeing their positions at the locus of high popular visual culture.

Given that former advocates of modernist culture did not have to deviate from their usual practice of incessantly describing their own activities, it might appear futile to argue that any cultural shift took place at all. Yet contrary to the claims of new art historians, (who were major benefactors of this subtle 'shift') it might be alleged that the sense of the post-modern in Britain *was* constructed out of the commentaries of its critics.

...the savage mauling which contemporary art has received during the past year will, surely, have the beneficial effect of turning it towards the potentially vast fund of human, political and social issues which affect the future of us all.⁷³

⁷³RICHARD CORK "Richard Cork's 1976 Art Review", *Evening Standard*, 30th December 1976.

CHAPTER 2

Crisis Criticism

Thus there developed an unconscious process by which critics manufactured schools of painting with their own built-in obsolescence. This view coincided with the interests of dealers and museum officials, for it gave them an opportunity continually to add to their public collections, and arrange exhibitions that displayed their knowledge of the new trends.¹

The development of various postmodernist practices and discourses throughout the late 70s and 80s has been an attempt to come to terms, first and foremost, with the undemocratic nature of Britain's major art institutions and the undemocratic place of art generally within the culture.²

Seizing on surface appearances many commentators have overtly and idealistically concentrated their criticisms and complaints on the contradictions of distribution. Much of this writing has been framed within liberal debates on distributive rights: that as citizens and consumers all people have a right to the equal share of satisfaction from art. The result has been a general *populist* tone to a large amount of art political writing: that if art can produce the right socially minded themes, accompanied by the right institutional provision, some organic link between art and the working class can be forged.³

The routine modernist continuum of revolt and counter-revolt, which has been no more meaningful than a reflex action over the past couple of decades, must be replaced by a more sane and steadily fulfilling alternative. [...] Although the men and women in this exhibition all have distinct ways of seeking that integration - ranging from street murals and collaborative work in schools to direct intervention in political struggle and door-to-door co-operative projects - they agree that avant-garde infighting to establish the supremacy of One True Path Forward is henceforth out of the question.⁴

There has long been a post-war ritual of intellectual hostility concerning avant-garde practices in Britain, particularly in the writings of John Berger, Ernst H. Gombrich and Kenneth Clark. In the late 1970s, however, a new coterie of neo-Marxist critics emerged as ambassadors of cultural change. They pronounced their indignation at the fecklessness of art under capitalism, while simultaneously promulgating a crisis in contemporary art. Unwittingly, the Conservative Party's political aspirations were being aided by these 'crisis critics' whose primary task was to

¹ROBERT HEWISON, "The Arts in Hard Times", *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75*, Methuen, London, 1986, p231.

²JOHN ROBERTS, "The Dialectics of Postmodernism: Thatcherism and the Visual Arts 1", *Postmodernism, politics and art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, p61.

³ibid. p58.

⁴RICHARD CORK, "Art For Whom?", *Art For Whom?*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1978, p7.

question paternalistic attitudes towards the visual arts, (while ensuring lucrative careers for themselves).

The seeds of such critiques were to emerge from Raymond Williams, who, in the mid-1970s, began to criticise the Arts Council for maintaining a 'consensus of goodwill' reminiscent of the aristocratic and upper middle class traditions of paternalistic benevolence towards the poor. Since the late 1950s, Williams' chief concern had been with the culturally disinherited masses, a concern which led him to stress the importance of developing a participating democracy in which people would have greater access to the channels of communication. In this, Williams had a great deal in common with the Arts Council's aims; indeed he was to spend three years as a member of the Council. However, Williams eventually came to believe that the possibility of social democracy was severely hampered by the paternalistic Quango nature of Britain's arts administration system. In Britain, debate and control of the arts were entirely the province of whatever body of trustees had power vested in them, and whatever groups of advisers, experts and officials were brought in to assist the Arts Councils.⁵ Andrew Brighton, one of the most Williamsian of crisis critics, offered the following explanation of this development:

In Britain there is no tradition of a strong indigenous art world. Unlike the European or American rich the wealthy in this country have not in sufficient numbers affected or accepted the values and evaluations of the traditional intellectuals so far as painting and sculpture are concerned. [...] State patronage has helped to professionalize the British art world by changing the balance of its population; as the amount of state financial support has grown, so too has the number of cultural civil servants.⁶

As Williams pointed out, this Quango model served to encourage the depoliticisation of art in Britain, an attitude inherent in the Arts Council's professional and managerial ethos. The modernist approach to art in which normative assertions were argued for as if objective, and the Leavisite hierarchical view of culture which Williams began to reject in the 1950s, were held to be corollaries of this structure. Williams therefore argued that the illusion of an apolitical critical objectivity central to maintaining the 'standards' of British art and international modernism, was in fact merely a method of maintaining the cultural supremacy

⁵"Constitutionally, it was governed by a Council whose members were appointed by the Government, but from which they were entirely independent, once the necessary grant-in-aid had been awarded. The Council was advised by the specialist staff it employed, together with panels of unpaid experts, but these panels had no control over that Arts Council's ultimate decisions. It was, in fact, a law unto itself. Throughout the 1960s the Arts Council was being urged to become more representative, to democratise its procedures and become less of a metropolitan oligarchy of interlocking interests. [...] The twelve Regional Arts Associations founded between 1958 and 1973 brought a measure of devolution (together with the Arts Councils of Scotland and Wales) but that did not create any democracy at the centre." HEWISON, *prev. cit.* p228.

⁶ANDREW BRIGHTON, "Official Art and the Tate Gallery", *Studio International*, Review Issue, 1/1977, p 42.

of the educated classes. Due to the persistence of paternalist attitudes, Williams concluded, culture was being shaped by the dominant classes elevating their culture to *the* culture. In the postmodern climate of the 1970s Williams was far from alone in his attack on the Modernist consensus.⁷ What was peculiarly British about his attack, however, was that it was argued in terms of entrenched class antagonism. In the United States, on the other hand, the turn against Modernism had emanated from artists whose primary concern was with examining the semantics of expression.⁸ While in some cases this examination had a political intent (e.g. Pop and Feminist Art), it was often carried out for its own sake (e.g. Minimalism, Conceptualism, Cageian Aesthetics of Indifference), as though in continuation of the Modernist apolitical project. Since the negation of Modernism, in both cases, remained a largely intellectual pursuit, the new forms of American art therefore remained unwillingly within the realms of high art, albeit with new anti-aesthetic and anti humanist bents. Such semiological art had certainly influenced a number of British conceptualist oriented artists practising throughout the 1970s. For a number of influential British art critics, however, the most important issues remained in the writings of Ruskin, Arnold, Leavis and Williams, all of who were primarily interested in the moral as opposed to the analytical qualities attributed to artworks. In Britain, with its long tradition of state patronage for the arts and its equally ripe class-system, Williams' materialist criticisms of Modernism were taken by some to be more relevant than the philosophical and poststructuralist critiques emanating from America and the Continent.

Richard Cork: arrivist art-critic, as radical as a Rotarian. He's concocted a huge career by saying virtually nothing and worrying no one in the establishment.⁹

⁷ This view was particularly prevalent in Britain during 1978: "With the growth in political and economic power of the organised working class, the state has had to mitigate the more obvious defects of capitalism by increasingly intervening in social and economic life. While the state is the armed guardian of an economic order and its ruling class, it wishes to be seen as the custodian of social order and increasingly as a neutral mediator in the conflicts between classes." Ibid. p 41. For even more extreme accounts of this position see ROGER TAYLOR, *Art: an Enemy of the People*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, and SUE BRANDEN, *Artists and People*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, both of whom elaborate the view that art is a partisan concept distinguished by certain associations which link it irrevocably with the middle classes. Both argue that once stripped of its class associations the concept of art is empty. Of course, some artworks are not immediately intelligible to anyone at all. They may be more available to the middle classes but not necessarily understood by them. Taylor and Branden's vulgar forms of Marxism fail to show that class connections are other than contingent. Nor did they elaborate on the disagreements that often occur amongst members of the middle class artworld. See R.W. BEARDSMORE, "Review: Art, An Enemy of the People", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 20, No.2 Spring 1980, p182-184.

⁸ "There is a marked difference between the art publications of London and New York. Both *Art Monthly* and *Studio International* have been deep in the fry of analysing the social issues of art. *Artscribe* may deplore some of the analysis but it does not ignore it. In the States, after the removal of Max Kozloff from *Artforum*, there is a total blackout (with the exception of feminist publications such as *Heresies*.) RUDOLF BARANIK, "US/UK Dialogue on Social Purpose", *Artscribe*, No.14, October 1978, p54.

⁹ ART & LANGUAGE (New York), "Appendix", *Fox* 3, June 1976.

Richard Cork has spent valiant years trying to explain the wrong heap of objects to the wrong bunch of people.¹⁰

He begins by lamenting the snuffing out of avant-garde outlets and opportunities by ignorant, media-induced hysteria, and ends by concluding that introverted avant-garde art is irresponsible and trivial and therefore, justifiably unpopular.¹¹

In the late 1970s Richard Cork elaborated Williams' ideas with almost missionary zeal.¹²

Cork was appointed art critic for the London *Evening Standard* in the autumn of 1969, having just graduated from Trinity Hall, Cambridge with a first in Fine Arts. In his 'Art News' column, he broke with the trivialising practice of much newspaper reviewing by dealing only with one show in each article, expounding his own opinions in the didactic general paragraphs which opened his pieces.¹³ Despite editorial pressure to do so, he refused to produce the usual potted commentaries and only in July 1976 did he finally agree to add a factual listing ('On View') at the end of each column.¹⁴

Cork was soon appointed to serve on the Art Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain (1971-74). It was during this period that the Art Panel began to place the avant-garde under its specialised protection.¹⁵ *The New Art* - including the work of Keith Arnatt, Art & Language,

¹⁰DONALD BROOK, "Books: A Cautious Bob Each Way", [Richard Cork, *The Social Role of Art*], *Art Monthly*, No.37, 1980, p22.

¹¹JANET DALEY, "The Art Critic's Art", *The Literary Review*, No. 9, 9th to 22nd February 1980, p28.

¹²"I certainly remember reading Williams in the 70s, he was somebody I was conscious of when I was at Cambridge in the 60s as one of the few dons who had something to say." Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

¹³ "In terms of the newspaper audience, what I remember most powerfully is when I would write about new developments, you'd quite often get a whole shoal of letters from readers abusing, saying 'how could you possibly be taken in by these non-sensical developments'? But I think that the anger very often centred on what the art was made of. It seemed that if an artist departed too much from painting or sculpture, the public were very ready to say 'this is not art', very ready to legislate, as if they were very clear in their own minds about what was or wasn't art. Much clearer actually than I was! It seemed to me that an awful lot of what was going on in the 70s was that very question, was interrogating the whole notion of art's own identity, and how you can actually push it out into areas that previously hadn't been considered as the territory of art. But I wouldn't say that those letters filled me with incredible despondency, in fact quite the reverse I felt that because I was able to write about these new developments in a forum like the *Standard*, which did actually get through to a lot of people who knew very little about art, was a positive thing because it meant that even when they were reacting with anger they were somehow confronting the whole question, asking themselves perhaps what kind of art they wanted. So at least it was in the air; there was a debate going on." Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

¹⁴ See: JOHN TAGG & PETER FULLER, "Richard Cork and the 'Road to Wigan Pier'", *Art Monthly*, No.30, 1979, p3.

¹⁵ "Having allowed themselves to be persuaded in the sixties that their position as a parallel source of patronage to the private gallery system was a problematic one (although it is not clear that this should necessarily be so) the Art Panel of the Council were unable to resist the conclusion that they had a unique

Victor Burgin, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert & George, John Hillard, Richard Long, and John Stezaker organised by Anne Seymour at the Hayward in November 1972 - largely inaugurated this policy. In support, for his first Critic's Choice exhibition selected for *Tooths* in 1973, Cork included works by Conrad Atkinson, John Stezaker, John Latham, David Dye, Gilbert and George, John Hillard, Bob Law, Richard Long, Gerald Newman, and the Nice Style Pose Band. The following year he was invited to select *Beyond Painting and Sculpture*, a British Arts Council touring exhibition which included works by Keith Arnatt, Victor Burgin, John Stezaker, David Dye, Gilbert and George, Hamish Fulton, David Lamelas and Gerald Newman; artists united by their "wish to question the supremacy of a value-system which until recently remained unchallenged except for a few outstanding twentieth century pioneers."¹⁶ This claim was almost entirely erroneous given that the Arts Council was far from democratic; on the contrary, it *was* the prevailing orthodoxy. Members of Art Advisory Panel, such as Cork, could be nominated by anyone, but only accepted only by the agreement of the Council.

The Panel then has the authority to appoint committees to organise exhibitions and to judge the awards schemes. [...] Panel members dispense awards one year, only to receive awards in the next from the very people (now serving as panel members) to whom they had presented them.¹⁷

This might explain why Cork carried his allegiance to these artists into the editorship of *Studio International* when he replaced Peter Townsend in the summer of 1975, at the suggestion of Etonian millionaire Michael Spens, an Edinburgh based architect, Scottish National Party activist, and new owner of the late international journal of modern art. The first issue under Cork's stewardship was devoted to 'Art and Photography', and contained his own article on John Hilliard as well as an 'editorial dialectic' on the 'Pitfalls and Priorities' of art magazines. Here he wrote of the need for a magazine that could relate art to the broadest of social bases while giving it the sustained, meditative and fully elaborated discussion which newspapers fail to provide.

responsibility to support artistic activity that was commercially unenviable." JANET DALEY, "The Arts Council vs. The Visual Arts", *The Literary Review*, October 1981, p40.

¹⁶CORK, "Introduction", *Beyond Painting & Sculpture: Works bought for the Arts Council by Richard Cork*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Exhibition Catalogue, 1974, p3. The exhibition opened at Leeds City Art Gallery on January 12th 1974. It then travelled to the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (February 16th -March 17th) and the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol (May 4th - June 8th).

¹⁷ DALEY, "The Arts Council vs. The Visual Arts", p40-41. Daley was one of the crisis critics' fiercest critics. As she pointed out Victor Burgin, among others at this time, was a member of the Art Advisory Panel and Awards to Artists Sub-committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain (1971-76). Much of the work selected by Cork at this point emerged from this tightly-knit neo-conceptualist milieu.

In March 1976, Cork “published an issue of *Studio International* on ‘Art & Social Purpose’ and began referring to himself as a ‘committed socialist’”.¹⁸ Cork was subsequently at pains to state that the British artworld’s lofty modernist ideals were arrogant myths, proposing “to restore a sense of purpose, to accept that artists cannot afford for a moment longer to operate in a vacuum of specialised discourse without considering their function in wider and more utilitarian terms.”¹⁹ In contrast to Roy Shaw, Cork followed the Williamsian line, arguing that high art’s ‘objective standards’, could only be available to the elite of which Shaw had become a member.²⁰ Since the high arts were the culture of the elite, the general public could only ever understand or appreciate the high arts if they adopted the ideology of the elite. For many on the Left, the mass appreciation of high culture could only be achieved by government changes in economic and educational systems, not by artists, arts administrators and art critics.

Cork disagreed, adopting a position similar to the ‘cultural materialism’ developed by Williams towards the end of the 1970s in the pages of the *New Left Review*. Like many intellectuals associated with the New Left, Williams sought to convict Marxists of an *insufficiently* materialist understanding of the superstructures. In *Marxism and Literature*, he rejected the concept of ‘superstructure’ for evading the question of whether culture is determined or determining.²¹ All aspects of the superstructure, Williams argued, had become so marked by the logic of power and domination that they were now material. Hence it had become impossible to explain culture with reference to the economic base since there was no basis for distinction between the two. A result of this view was that those areas that had hitherto been regarded as superstructures, such as culture, could now be seen to hold immense political power. In the right hands, culture could be as effective a political weapon as economic intervention. The realisation that Marxism had hitherto underestimated cultural agency encouraged Cork to use *Studio International* and the *Evening Standard* as a platform to promote ‘Art for Social Purpose’.

Problems emerged immediately. “Embedded in the use of this phrase is the negation of the (true) axiom that art always and everywhere has a social and political purpose.”²² Moreover, there was a risk that ‘Art for Social Purpose’ might simply be a boost to the

¹⁸TAGG & FULLER, “Richard Cork and the ‘Road to Wigan Pier’”, p4.

¹⁹CORK, ‘Art and Social Purpose’, *Studio International*, March/April 1976.

²⁰ Cork conveniently neglected to mention that he himself was a graduate of Cambridge!

²¹See RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

²²JEFFREY STEELE, “Notes Towards Some Theses Against the New Kitsch”, *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p19.

bourgeois 'culture industry'.²³ This much was suggested when Cork asked Mel Ramsden if he would contribute to the September/October issue of *Studio* that would be themed on contemporary art magazines. Art & Language (A&L) replied sardonically:

Who do you think you are talking to? [Magazines like *Studio*] represent a capitalist consumption-category masquerading as reality and fooling people into accepting capitalist production relations. [...] ...all we would be doing there is launching socialist balloons for 'harmonious' capitalist consumption cf. *Studio*'s arriviste-reeking 'themes' e.g. "Art and Socialist Purpose".²⁴

Indeed, as a critical experiment, Cork's interventions launched a number of balloons (Peter Fuller being the most infamous). Within just six months, Spens' interference had caused enormous shockwaves to ripple through the subdued British art press, the impact of his take-over being magnified during "the national nervous breakdown."²⁵ Under Townsend, the abstract painter James Faure Walker had been a contributor to *Studio International*. From the moment he took over *Studio*, Cork virtually banished discussion of painting and sculpture from the journal in order to concentrate on 'newer' developments. Cork's technological determinism having made his copy less welcome, Faure Walker and a group of artist friends decided to set up *Artscribe* with a small grant from the Greater London Arts Association, (provided, conveniently enough, while his wife Caryn was on the board²⁶), and a loan from the dealer Leslie Waddington. The artist-run typewritten broadsheet was initially intended to make critics redundant, launching itself with an anti-*Studio* didactic editorial:

Artscribe has appeared at a time when popular critical opinion in British Art seems to be wavering between leftist dialectics and academic formalism. [...] *Artscribe* does not endorse the rationale of an art to illustrate a social or psychological thesis, but believes in the conviction of the primary aesthetic element in human experience.²⁷

²³"...the objective cretinization of painters, opens the door for a further connected system of false ideas about the social function of art - most notably the false idea that it is not itself an indispensable part of the system for propagating the ideology of the bourgeois class." *ibid.*, p19.

²⁴ART & LANGUAGE (New York), "Appendix", *Fox* 3, June 1976.

²⁵BEN JONES, "Editorial", *Artscribe*, No. 1, January-February 1976, p4.

²⁶ "As an historical note, in 1976/77, when Caryn Fare Walker was employed as a Visual Arts Officer for the Greater London Arts Association, GLAA assistance was awarded to the magazine *Artscribe*, edited by none other than James and Caryn Fare Walker." MICHAEL DALEY, "Arts Council Awards", *Art Monthly*, Number 49, September 1981, p32.

²⁷BEN JONES, "Editorial", p4.

Much in line with this formalist polemic, Faure Walker used *Artscribe* as a platform from which to launch a sustained attack on Cork's critical territory,²⁸ the semantically-based artistic practices being pursued by artists such Hillard, Stezaker, and Burgin:

The artist as the antenna of society is a myth: so is the notion that 'new' art is the most relevant art. [...] the artist speaks as a dictator, demanding that artists be put in control of all communications media - artists as an elite corps of super brains, cultural engineers who should take over the TV stations from the mindless technicians that brainwash the masses - the artist as demystifier, the liberator of consciousness. [...] (the identity of being an artist) can only be maintained by reducing the content of what is being shown, or making it incoherent, so that the artist-persona depends for its authority on the institution that publicises it. The paradox at the present time is that a radical initiative can only stem from this identity being dropped, along with its authoritarian associations: in other words the artist must not be an artist, so much as an ordinary member of society....²⁹

Faure Walker's attack on Photoconceptualism has much in common with A&L contemporaneous disdain for the movement.³⁰ Faure Walker, however, had a different agenda from A&L given that he was seeking a critical ground for a "narrowly partisan defence of a highly limited range of [formalist] painting and sculpture"³¹ produced by himself and his friends: "Arguably it is now more progressive to work within a tradition than to try to escape from it."³² "We are not always convinced of the newness of 'new developments'; and polarisations between 'traditional' and 'new', or between 'mainstream' and 'advanced' are notoriously superficial. If supporting painting and sculpture is a partisan viewpoint, then we may be partisan. But real newness in *any* medium is what counts."³³

Brandon Taylor's characterisation of the bad feeling around at the time was subtly different to Faure Walker's. Like Faure Walker, Taylor claimed that *Artscribe* was initially

²⁸See also: JAMES FAURE WALKER, "In Defence of *Artscribe*", *Art Monthly*, No.34, 1980, p10-12. and BARRY MARTIN, "The Surface Before *Artscribe*", *Art Monthly*, No.34, 1980, p12.

²⁹FAURE WALKER, "Towards a Definition of the Progressive in Painting", *Artscribe*, No.3, Summer 1976, p13.

³⁰For an account of Art & Language's critique, see Chapter 7 Semi(o) Art?

³¹ BRANDON TAYLOR, "Writing on the Surface: A Recent Tendency at *Artscribe*", *Art Monthly*, Number 33, February 1980, p3. There was no figurative art in the magazine until the 5th issue.

³² FAURE WALKER, "Towards a Definition of the Progressive in Painting", p13.

³³THE EDITORS, "A Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines: *Artscribe*", *Studio International*, Art Magazines Issue, September/October 1976, p155. Faure Walker was to briefly become an important figure in the 'return to painting' movement in 1979, selecting his friends for the Hayward Annual of that year. However, since he primarily favoured abstract and process painting, he was not to sustain a hold on this position, being overshadowed by the arguments for narrative and figurative painting. His idea of 'tradition' clearly also differs from that of the 'Hard Won Image' faction of the early 1980s, lacking any nationalist bias.

“dedicated to a modest but interesting programme of disestablishmentarianism. In those early days *Artscribe* was designed to prick the flesh of official indifference to younger artists on the one hand, and to oppose the woolly Marxism of *Studio International* on the other.”³⁴ With Taylor as co-editor, Faure Walker and his circle of formalist painters were unable to dominate the new journal. In the first edition of the magazine, Taylor had already taken A&L’s journal to task for being formalist; arguing that analytical conceptualism had a close relationship with the tactics of holistic or non-relational painting:

[In contrast to analytical philosophy] Art & Language were apt to induce nothing much better than a sense of unfocussed inattention, if not of actual somnolence, in which the eye is left to search in and between the lines of text, never discerning more than a vague stringing-together of concepts and barely ever being able to bring into sharp definition what was being positively asserted or denied. [...] - so the eye is enlisted in a vain search for intelligible detail, just as it did within the open field of an Olitski or a Noland.³⁵

In direct opposition to Faure Walker’s interests, Taylor used his new found editorial power to promote the work of *his* friends, “a group of artists working in or near St. Martin’s School of Art in London, and including Peter Clallis, Johnathan Miles, Stezaker, John A. Walker and Paul Womball.”³⁶ Using a picture of the Daily Mirror’s attack on Andre’s *Equivalent VIII* to illustrate his point,³⁷ Taylor stuck to *Artscribe*’s editorial policy, arguing that high and radical culture were now fused, and as such art could no longer be thought of as a radical force.³⁸ In recognition of this, Taylor claimed, “the St. Martins group begin from the proposition that the public at large have become reasonably well familiarised with the general range of avant-garde postures and attitudes.”³⁹ This did not amount to much in practical terms. According to the group’s 1976 *Manifesto*, works such as Walker’s *Capitalism Works* - a poster of Clint Eastwood as his gun-totting Dirty Harry alter-ego - countered “advertising rhetoric on its own terms, using its own methods, thereby avoiding the avant-garde tag.”⁴⁰ This being the case it

³⁴ TAYLOR, “Writing on the Surface: A Recent Tendency at *Artscribe*”, p3.

³⁵ TAYLOR, “Textual Art”, *Artscribe*, No.1, January-February 1976, p7.

³⁶ TAYLOR, “The Avant-Garde and St. Martins”, *Artscribe*, ‘Education Issue’, No.5, September-October 1976, p5.

³⁷ Cork also used this illustration in his Editorial for ‘Art and Social Purpose’ *Studio International*, March/April, 1976.

³⁸ THE EDITORS, *Studio International*, September/October 1976, p155.

³⁹ TAYLOR, *Artscribe*, No.5, p5.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

is difficult to see how the St. Martins School of 'semio-art' differed from Photoconceptualism generally.⁴¹ Indeed, as Taylor concluded, the "present attempt by the St. Martin group to de-structure poster and magazine advertising in a society which neither reveres advertising techniques nor controls their use might therefore ultimately prove to be unstrategical."⁴²

From the beginning, then, *Artscribe* was a strange brew.⁴³ While aping *Studio*'s thematic approach, initial issues were devoted to decidedly *anti-Studio* topics such as 'Sculpture' and 'Painting Now'. However, 'Education', a bumper fourth issue edited by Taylor, had much in common with Cork's preoccupations. Cork's critical position was subsequently a topic of one issue.⁴⁴ Formalist copy being scant, "conventional trading with art critics by issue seven, marked the diminution of their vanguard stance (Even the rock column vanished.)"⁴⁵ *Studio* and *Art Monthly* writers such as Peter Fuller, and Timothy Hyman were recruited as regular contributors, each with yet another set of radically different critical agendas.⁴⁶ Having meagrely digested the writings of the New Left, Fuller was able to convince Cork, his Cambridge connection, that they were moderately in agreement.⁴⁷ Fuller's

⁴¹ See Chapter 5 Photoconceptualism

⁴² *ibid.*, p6.

⁴³ "It got a bit strange at that point. No one really knew what *Artscribe* was doing. It's a bit like *Modern Painters* nowadays actually, isn't it? Maybe there's a parallel there." Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

⁴⁴ FAURE-WALKER, "Richard Cork interviewed by James Fare-Walker", *Artscribe*, No.7, May 1977, p41-44.

⁴⁵ RORY COONAN, "Style in the 70s", *Art Monthly*, Number 29, September 1979, p14.

⁴⁶ See FULLER, "Responds to 'Painting Now'", *Artscribe*, No.6, April 1977, p31-34, and FAURE-WALKER, "James Fare-Walker Replies", *Artscribe*, No.6, April 1977, p34-37. Hyman soon became an influential advocate of Narrative Painting. See Chapter 10 Nude Review.

⁴⁷ While editor of *Studio*, Cork had commissioned articles by Brighton, Fuller and John Tagg. *The Gang of Three* later betrayed this trust. See TAGG & FULLER, "Richard Cork and the 'Road to Wigan Pier'", *Art Monthly*, No.30, 1979, p5. "I remember being astonished when that article came out because Peter Fuller certainly hadn't intimated to me that it was going to appear, so it was a real kind of body blow. Far and away the nastiest article anybody has ever written about me. It was quite difficult to know what was going on in Peter's mind at that time, because he was very much on the change. It was around the time when he convinced himself that the only future was to look back at Ruskin and re-evaluate the nineteenth-century in some way, look at Pre-Raphaelitism, but also to defend painting. And I suppose that's where we departed company completely because I really couldn't see any point in going back to Ruskin, and I certainly wouldn't have wanted to see myself as some sort of last ditch defender of painting. We were hugely different in that sense; he was denouncing an awful lot of what had gone on in the 70s, and to me becoming very very conservative. Medium fetishism really, which I have never been able to understand. He was certainly very ambitious, which I hadn't realised in the 70s, but became very clear. I think in the early 70s he'd felt blocked and frustrated, and that maybe by the end of the 70s he had defined himself. To me, he had by that time, I'm afraid, lost a lot of what had made him a good writer and what made me want to have him contribute to *Studio*. It became a sort of psychodrama in a way." Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998. Tagg, Fuller and Brighton had

copy soon became very welcome at *Studio*, wherein he emulated Brighton by claiming that “capitalism has destroyed the traditions of Fine Art which it created”.⁴⁸ In many ways, however, Fuller was experimenting with a more intemperate litigation against the fine art establishment, arguing, like Roger Taylor, that the late modernist artworld, now robbed of its social and political functions, had *no* convincing justification for its existence:

There can be no serious long-term argument for the continuous allocation of Government funds for middle-class obsessional game; that is why the Tate’s present acquisitions policy has been so vigorously opposed from both left and right, and from the entire art world spectrum, from *The Burlington Magazine* to Marxist critics.⁴⁹

Rather than being an attempt to recombine art and life, much of this polemic was in the cause of career mongering. Fuller’s ‘radical’ views regarding the (public) artworld would never have been heard without the rapid expansion of the (private) art press in Britain that took place in 1976.

Controversial babble deficient in laconic determination sold more art magazines.⁵⁰ It is telling that Fuller never concluded, as others did, that the artworld should be abandoned for community art or avant-garde provocation. His conservative upbringing told him that a higher order of discriminating authority had to be found, fortuitously safeguarding his future career as our critical helmsman. Throughout his remaining life, his slender grasp of vulgar Marxism made him highly critical of *any* governmental involvement in ‘high culture’, forcing him into the irreparable position of mimicking the Thatcherite Selsdon Group’s philistine castigation of the arts council. At the same time, Fuller’s impetuous neurotic investigations into theology, Marxism and psychology was leading him to find an ersatz quintessence by advocating a ‘redemptive aesthetics’ much in line with High Tories (or the ‘Old Right’) such as John Ruskin and Roger Scruton, defending traditional practices such as painting and sculpture against the new media.⁵¹

attempted to sue Cork over *the State of British Art* transcript. This was prevented when Cork published a transcript of the conference in the Eleventh Hour.

⁴⁸ FULLER, “The Crisis in Professionalism”, *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p80. “My central historical perspective on British culture and history has been greatly influenced by Tom Nairne and Perry Anderson. See especially, TOM NAIRNE, “The British Historical Elite”, *New Left Review*, No.23, and PERRY ANDERSON, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, *New Left Review*, No.23 and “Components of the National Culture”, *New Left Review*, No.50.” FULLER, “Footnote 4” *ibid.*, p87.

⁴⁹ FULLER, “The Tate, The State and the English Tradition”, *Studio International*, Volume 194, Number 988, 1/1978, p7-8.

⁵⁰ “...coverage is an idle and fraudulent concept. Idle because it needs to permit the exercise of beady-eyed interests in the generation of gossip and ‘controversy’; fraudulent because the spurious coherence and comprehensiveness by which ‘coverage’ is exemplified in any given issue, or totality of issues, serves to mask the specific and cognitive content of ideological conflict and homogenise and trivialise its intellectual constituents.” CHARLES HARRISON, “Harrison on Peter Dormer”, *Art Monthly*, Number 47, June 1981, p17.

⁵¹ See Chapter 12 Schooling London

To complicate matters further, *Artscribe* did not remain the sole contender to *Studio*'s mantle for too long; Townsend had been working on a project of his own. In October 1976 he launched *Art Monthly* with Jack and Nell Wendler, with the aim of promoting "British Art in its national context".⁵² The first issue concentrated on the Bricks debacle⁵³, in addition to the effects that devolution might have on the Scottish artworld, giving detailed discussion of new arts institutions such as Glasgow's Third Eye Centre which opened in May 1975. By abandoning the need to concentrate on thematics, and art journals' penchant for lengthy academic articles, *Art Monthly* was able to respond quickly to the turmoil of events that would take place in the British artworld during the next few years. The second issue in November was able to devote its front page to a report on P-Orridge's ordeal at the ICA.⁵⁴ The previous 'Education Issue' of *Artscribe* had commissioned William Crozier to produce a review of the Redcliffe-Maud Report, by way of a contribution to its thematic.⁵⁵ *Art Monthly* needed no such excuses; in its fourth edition in January 1977, it printed a report on the TUC's arts policy document simply because it had been published.⁵⁶ Seeing the error of its ways, *Artscribe* abandoned its initial penchant for theme-based issues.

Art Monthly's provincial concerns clearly distanced the new journal from the internationalism of *Studio*. *Artscribe* had also sought to be "national rather than international. Most artists in England [sic.] receive no coverage of any kind by the press at large - not even bad coverage. It seems to us topsy-turvy to look overseas before taking account of what lies nearer to hand."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, *Artscribe*'s idea of 'national' meant Anglocentric and metropolitan, perhaps unsurprising given the nepotism rife in the artworld at this time. *Art Monthly*'s low cost, wider distribution, flexibility, frequent and focused coverage of a wide range of issues quickly made it the more significant contender for *Studio*'s mantle.⁵⁸ This

⁵²CLIVE PHILLPOT, "An Insular View of British Art Mags", *Art Monthly*, No.1, October 1976, p1-2. Philpot went on to comment: "The recent bi-monthly newspaper *Artscribe* seems to be attempting some of the things that a weekly or fortnightly publication could usefully provide, but it is difficult to see it as a national organ since its view of art is principally from the standpoint of a particular kind of painting and sculpture."

⁵³CARL ANDRE, "The Bricks Abstract", *Art Monthly*, No.1, October 1976, p25.

⁵⁴EDITORIAL, "P-Orridge's Gruelling Days", *Art Monthly*, No.2, November 1976, p1-2. See also Chapter 4: Guaranteed Disappointment.

⁵⁵WILLIAM CROZIER, "The Redcliffe-Maud Report", *Artscribe*, Education Issue, No.4/5, September-October 1976, p21.

⁵⁶CHARLES GOSFORD, "TUC and other documents on art policies", *Art Monthly*, No.4, February 1977, p6-9.

⁵⁷THE EDITORS, "A Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines: *Artscribe*", *Studio International*, Art Magazines Issue, September/October 1976, p155.

was soon to become a reality. When Spens purchased *Studio* in 1975 it had more institutional subscribers than the whole print run of most other British art magazines. In the later 1980s, under Spens' ownership and occasional editorship, this great asset with its world-wide distribution of art coverage in the UK was piloted into extinction.

Spens was not solely to blame for this. Unfortunately Cork's penchant for thematic, issue-based editions promptly and deliberately provoked the disapproval of a readership used to a more generalised, de-politicised analysis of the traditionally privileged media of painting and sculpture:

In May this year, the anniversary of the month in which I took up the editorship of *Studio International*, a terse letter arrived from the Head of a London art school. Accompanied by our subscription, order which I have not filled in, the letter announced that 'I am sending back my renewal form, as it seems at the moment that you no longer find painting a part of modern art. Therefore we will no longer be ordering your magazine.' I welcomed the letter. It was, in one sense, an unpleasant message to receive: the half dozen issues I had then edited were being summarily dismissed by one of the very institutions on which *Studio* relies for its ground-base of support. But in another and far more important sense, the letter encapsulated precisely the attitude towards art which I was dedicated to opposing through the magazine. And the appearance of this dissenting verdict from the heart of the art-educational establishment proved that I had begun to draw blood.⁵⁹

Following Cork's review of the 1977 Hayward Annual in the *Standard*, a series of heated letters were printed in *The Guardian*, Peter Blake, leader of the recently formed Brotherhood of Ruralists, leading the critical onslaught.⁶⁰

The Richard Cork - Paul Overy (*The Times*) - Caroline Tisdall (*The Guardian*) troika were attacked for their singular disinterest/dislike for painting and sculpture as such, and their avowed aim (at that time) to disallow traditional media in the visual arts as being irrelevant/unacceptable/unworthy of critical attention, and, as a corollary, their doctrinaire insistence on using what available space there was for newspaper coverage of the arts of half-baked pop-political theorising. What is particularly disingenuous about Cork's fantasy of himself and his comrades as the victims of 'established interests' is that the three of them virtually *constituted* the newspaper art critical establishment. [...] At that time, many of the mainstream British art institutions

⁵⁸*Artscribe* was initially sold for 20p and *Art Monthly* for 40p. Both 'inkys' contained writing that rivalled the £1.75 'glossy' *Studio* (often by the same critics). Artists and students rather than just institutions could easily afford both magazines.

⁵⁹RICHARD CORK, "Editorial", *ibid.*, p100.

⁶⁰The Brotherhood of Ruralists was formed in 1975 by Blake and a group of six Romanticist friends with the purpose of expressing "through personal vision and experience of our native heritage a celebration of the English countryside." FRANK COLE, "Foreword", NICHOLAS USHERWOOD, *The Brotherhood of Ruralists*, Lund Humphries, London, 1981, p6. See Chapter 10 The Nude Review.

seemed to have been seized by a peculiarly intolerant coterie of young Turks, set to freeze out any artistic form which they found ideologically unacceptable.⁶¹

By the summer of 1977 Trevor Grove, features editor of the *Standard*, less alarmed at Cork's growing 'radicalism' than at the rapid decline in *Studio*'s readership, asked if he would devote two columns a month to rounding up exhibitions other than those that took place in Lisson Grove. To Cork, this meant compromising his polemical column by transforming it into an 'objective' listing of visual arts events. He resigned on March 15th.⁶² The final edition of Cork's *Studio International* followed within a year, consisting simply of an unedited transcript of *The State of British Art* conference held at the ICA, London in 1978 - a discussion of his ideas concerning social art organised by Andrew Brighton, Peter Fuller and John Tagg.⁶³ Having exhausted popular and institutional art journalism, Cork (re)turned his attention to the machinations of contemporary art's primary distribution network: the gallery.

A man of many contradictions, Cork began to encourage a form of art practice analogous to Williams' debate over ethics and aesthetics by organising a series of gallery exhibitions intended to persuade artists to forgo the gallery system (!?!) in order to make art for 'ordinary people'. Of course, the idea that there might have posed a threat to the Arts Council's smooth running as a Quango is ludicrous. Cork's time on the Art Panel of the ACGB supporting the conceptual and performance art he now discredited had served him well, his 'new' efforts to lend critical and financial support to art for social purpose were given the Council's full backing, thereby ensuring that any dissent was immediately recuperated:

Richard Cork proposes as an alternative, to explore recent attempts to relate art to questions of social concern. This theme seems particularly appropriate to a gallery whose unique position in one of London's most popular parks makes it accessible to a wide public.⁶⁴

Cork's problematic curatorial stance was widely disseminated in 1978 with *Art for Whom?* at the Serpentine Gallery in London (22nd April - 14th May).

WE are increasingly dissatisfied with the failure of so much contemporary art to communicate with anyone outside a small circle of initiates. [...] WE are convinced

⁶¹JANET DALEY, "The Art Critic's Art", *The Literary Review*, No. 9, 9th to 22nd February 1980, p27-28. While Daley's comments concerning the monopoly in British art criticism were fairly accurate, her assessment of the situation within the Arts Council of Great Britain presented only half the picture. See Chapter 12 Schooling London for more details.

⁶²On June 9th 1977, Cork was replaced by Edward Lucie-Smith as *The Evening Standard*'s art critic, who lasted only until 1980, when Brian Sewell took over.

⁶³See Chapter 6 Semio Art for a discussion of Tagg's interventions.

⁶⁴ SUE GRAYSON, "Preface", *Serpentine Gallery Report*, 1978.

that art must be transformed into a progressive force for change in the future. WE consider that the artist ought to engage with as the working people as possible who think that art has nothing to do with them. [...] WE declare that art needs people as much as people need art: the two should be inextricably linked with each other, and never divorced so damagingly again.⁶⁵

Although adopting the rather absurd polemical style of (elitist) modernist manifestos in order to get their points across, Cork and his artistic associates remained true to Williams' ideals, suggesting that the artworld should be restructured along the lines of a participating democracy.

Artists will never succeed in becoming truly popular merely by imposing their work unchanged, on audiences whose needs and attitudes have only been perceived on an abstract and paternalist level. [...] Artists have yet to learn how they can make themselves responsive to these ideas; study with unpatronising care why it is that certain recurrent kinds of image do occupy a venerated place over the mantelpiece in many homes; find out what the term 'art' actually means, if it means anything at all, to those who never visit the galleries which house it; and debate how far their own work could ever be reconciled with what the public likes.⁶⁶

Cork's response to this problem was to industriously favour artists who produced socially responsible art forms selecting "artists whom, with one exception, he had begun to support in articles written during his last year as critic of the *Standard*. [...] The climate of opinion must have changed very rapidly in the four years since he had enjoyed the 'unaccustomed luxury' of lavishing public money on just such art as he now decried."⁶⁷ Perhaps more than any other artist, Conrad Atkinson's work epitomised the kind of practice which Cork now favoured.

⁶⁵ CORK, CONRAD ATKINSON, PETER DUNN, LORRAINE LEESON, ISLINGTON SCHOOLS ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECT AND PUBLIC ART WORKSHOP, "Art For Whom?", Letter to *Art Monthly*, No. 16, 1978, p 25-26.

⁶⁶ CORK, "Art For Whom?, *Art For Whom?*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1978, p9.

⁶⁷ TAGG & FULLER, "Richard Cork and the 'Road to Wigan Pier'", p5.

CHAPTER 3

GOD SAVE Conrad Atkinson

I leave aside the arguments about the radicalisation of a particular area of art as a political act; but I remember thinking in the early 70s that conceptual art was merely more of the same - only different. 'A magnificent sunset mistaken for dawn' in Victor Hugo's words.¹

I don't believe as many do that theory can constitute a practice. Conversely I don't believe that you can simply have a practice - material conditions simply don't allow privileged space 'outside' of the State or society.²

For a modern home and cheap electricity / Streamlined functional neat simplicity / Put yourself on the slum clearance list / Dial a dialectical materialist / Find out what your net potential is / Get married to an existentialist / Don't doubt your own identity / Dress down to a cool anonymity / The pierre cardin line to infinity / Clothes to climb into the meritocracy / The new age of benevolent bureaucracy³

To a large extent, Atkinson had largely prefigured Cork's ideas. By the turn of the seventies he already felt that, in their theoretical pursuits, artists had become detached from practice. The philosophical problems concerning art as an institutionally defined category and as a political and social practice debated by conceptualists, Marxists and feminists, soon came under fire as passive forms of resistance. Atkinson insinuated that artists and art historians should be less preoccupied with the semantics of the job description, and more concerned with using their influence to actively expose and undermine the machinations of capital. The conceptual games of artworld and the numerous institutionally based critiques then receiving attention (from Cork among others) in exhibitions such as *When Attitudes Become Form* and *The New Art*, entirely distracted people's attention from the urgent need for *action* in the 'real' world.

The New Art exhibition in 1972 at the Hayward Gallery I considered really to be a busted flush. [...] It seemed to me that the conceptual art movement was profoundly academic and rooted in an attempt to corral practice and marginalise it.⁴ ...art had to do something, become a utility again, because we'd got to the point in the sixties where art was anything which was useless. If you couldn't use it, it was art. [...] I got to the point after the *Strike* exhibition where I was like Monet - he couldn't see anything

¹CONRAD ATKINSON, "People's Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976", in CAROLINE TISDALL & SANDY NAIRNE eds. *Conrad Atkinson: Picturing the System*, Pluto Press / ICA, 25th Nov-23rd Dec 1981, p22.

²ATKINSON, "Introduction", *The State of the Art and the Art of the State: Power Lecture Given to the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia, October 1983*, Working Press, London, 1991, p8.

³JOHN COOPER CLARKE, "Euro Communist/Gucci Socialist", *Ten Years in an Open Neck Shirt*, Arena, London, 1981.

⁴ATKINSON, Working Press, London, 1991, p5-6.

without looking at the light, and I couldn't see anything without looking at the politics.⁵

Strike at Brannans held at the ICA, London 25th May - 25th June 1972, was a candid attempt to escape from formal and conceptual investigations, to concentrate instead on the effects of Late Capitalism. The strike at Brannans Thermometer factory in his home town Cleator Moor on the industrial strip of West Cumbria, concerned work conditions relating to health and negotiations on equal opportunity for men and women. Workers operating with mercury were exposed to poisonous vapours seven times the permissible level, opening them to the risk of industrial sicknesses such as "swollen gums, loss of teeth, tremors, kidney damage and brain disease."⁶ Atkinson made use of letters, photography, super 8mm films and video. Little attention was to be given to the roughness of his video technique, (this was some time prior to anti-aesthetic 'grunge formalism'), so that viewers might concentrate on such facts as profit and death. Drawing together 'facts' in the manner of a newspaper reporter, and images in the manner of a collagist, Atkinson produced a synthesis that would make them understandable to the viewer. Slides of the village comparing the workers' cottages were juxtaposed with images of the timber framed luxury homes of the directors, ten miles away in the Lake District National Park. During the exhibition, there were a number of meetings between representatives of the Strike Committee, the local MP, John Cunningham, and May Hobbs of the London Nightcleaner's campaign. Receipts from the sale of prints went towards the strike fund. Atkinson claimed some success in that one of the departments at Brannan's London became 100% unionised after seeing the exhibition about the strike. Unfortunately, the strike did not achieve its goal and was called off in August 1972.

Work, Wages and Prices, followed at the ICA, London between 5th and the 28th of April 1974, before touring to the Islington People's Rights Centre, London in June 1974, and Nathan Arts Centre, Newcastle in October 1974. As part of the ICA's programme of exhibitions, films and talks entitled *Alienation*, Atkinson illustrated the fact that wealth was considerably more unequally distributed in Britain than in the United States - despite its millionaires and billionaires. The exhibition was organised into five bands of information designed to develop this contention. At the top ran a line of ticker tape print-out from the Stock Exchange showing the downward movement in prices on the first day of Harold Wilson's Labour government. Next came photographs, in contact sheet form, of people at work. Below that, a collection of wage slips of low-paid workers, both industrial and agricultural, developed the contrast between the remuneration of the poor and the wealthy. Below this a number of

⁵ATKINSON, "Conrad Atkinson: Interview with Richard Cork", *Studio International*, 191 March/April 1976, p180.

⁶"Mercury Hazards", an abstract from a guideline document issued by the TUC, and exhibited at *Strike at Brannans*.

newspaper articles and reports were juxtaposed to reveal class divisions and inequalities of wage earning and wealth; a flat in Hyde Park Gardens costing £350,000 was seen next to a report on 12,000 homeless London families; on Christmas Eve Mary McCoy died trying to eat cardboard (*The Times* 29th December 1972) while Lord Derby's chauffeur drove 400 miles to obtain streaky bacon (*Daily Express* 24th December 1973). The bottom line included more newspaper cuttings, exhibition reviews (from *Studio International*), together with visitor's comments added during the period of the exhibition. Visitors were also invited to participate in planned discussions with artists and trades unionists. Atkinson clearly intended this to be controversial, to question not only the interests of the artworld, but the society which allows it to exist:

You can get away with anything as long as it isn't political; you can be as controversial as you like, bring sex into it or whatever - but the last thing the artworld will accept is any kind of political statement, which seems to me to be nonsense.⁷

Thus, as with *Strike at Brannans*, Atkinson incorporated an enormous amount of evidence into the work: matching newspaper clippings, real documentation of factual digests, excerpts from government reports, statistics, stock exchange print outs and biographies with colour slides of graffiti, street posters, people performing manual jobs and mass demonstrations. While Atkinson used whatever techniques and materials seemed appropriate in order to drive home his points - photographs, print, paint, collage, and found objects - his work remained resolutely pictorial, resembling the stylistic devices employed by museum diorama rather than the anti-morphological concerns of post-conceptual installation art. Atkinson's vast picture atlas of Late Capitalism invited viewers to examine motifs within different visual and verbal texts, to analyse the ways political values are incorporated into language and viewed through a multitude of practices, practices which might be understood as a vast assemblage of verbal and visual possibilities taken from marginal and dominant cultures. Although they could have constituted "exhibits in a court room prosecution"⁸ the information was arranged in such a way as to be entirely overwhelming, to present society as unsustainably divided and decadent, to force viewers into action by nauseating them: "He does not allow us to forget, to be side-tracked by aesthetics or dazzling reportage. Instead he nags and unsettles the conscience by presenting the inescapable flaws in our society as the first and only real priority undiluted by artistic diversions."⁹ It can therefore be claimed that in using collage, montage, graphics, photographs and text, Atkinson's work was not scripted by the self-reflexive Althusserianism that was beginning to dominate Photoconceptualism. On the contrary, Atkinson adopted the stance of a

⁷ATKINSON in HARRY COEN, "Making an Art of Politics", *Newcastle Journal*, October 1974.

⁸RICHARD CORK, "Assault by the Facts of Life", *Evening Standard*, London, 25th April 1974, p32.

⁹ibid.

theoretical luddite, mistakenly assuming that political content could exist without form and vice-versa: “It was saying the medium isn’t the message, the message is the message.”¹⁰

Taken in context, Atkinson’s impatience is perhaps understandable. His ‘naive’ documentary style was certainly a success in so far as it gave the impression of ‘doing work’ without need for the restrictive practices of theory or aesthetics, forcing a large number of artists to consider ‘direct action’ as a viable option. However, a number of related criticisms can be made of his practice. On the one hand, Atkinson’s scorn for the relationship between form and theory failed to confront the panoptic power of right-wing propaganda produced by the advertising industry, a factor which semio-artists at least attempted to rectify. Given this, Atkinson proved to be fully reliant on the public gallery system in order to put across his message. This in turn contradicted his distaste for the gallery system, the ways in which it encourages passive rather than active nihilism or critical consumption. Thus, from the beginning, Atkinson’s calls for a greater degree of political activism in the artworld were thwarted by his ties with an inherently conservative institution. This is clarified by Atkinson’s production, his ‘activity’ being primarily as a documentary maker rather than a participant in history. We are therefore forced to ask a number of questions. Was there an attitude inherent in self-identification in Atkinson’s definition of himself as a “cultural producer” which implied that the (re)production of culture was in itself a sufficient response to cultural issues? Was there an implication that the ‘cultural producer’ identity somehow lessened his responsibility for cultural conditions? What were the possibilities for real engagement? In all, these questions are not meant primarily as a critique of Atkinson’s ‘art for politics’ sake’, but rather as a critique of the perception that a class of ‘cultural’ producers might exist as an independent social class.

Following these tentative gallery sojourns, Atkinson made a more concerted effort to engage his art practice with the Left. The conventionalism of Atkinson’s aesthetics and politics, was clear from his ‘artistic’ involvement with the Labour movement:

The labour movement has pledged itself to an assault on the commanding heights of the economy, but they have never made a commitment to engage in the commanding heights of cultural production. [...] I felt that sickening sense of being out on a limb with the banners, of having no points of reference, no sense of visual tradition, no Cezanne of the labour movement, no one who had stripped the philosophy and tradition down to its material elements and reworked the whole thing.¹¹

For a Socialist, Atkinson here maintains an unusually high degree of respect for high art (“the heights of cultural production”), which he saw as something to “engage in” rather than assault, a disposition which clearly distinguishes his approach from contemporary neo-Situationists and dadanarchists such as King Mob and The Angry Brigade. Indeed, Atkinson was inaugural in

¹⁰ATKINSON, *Studio International*, 191, p179.

¹¹ATKINSON, “People’s Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976”, in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p17.

setting up the Artists' Union, seeking cultural links with the trade union movement while encouraging artists to work in dispute situations as a direct aid to the unions involved, rejecting claims that culture is a blunt tool with which to counter violence as a force of change.

When speaking of giving the Labour movement a new visual tradition, Atkinson evoked Modernist concepts such as 'form follows function', and 'less is more', the very aesthetic predicates he allegedly opposed. In this, it is conceivable that he may have been attempting to impair the slick promotional skills of the plutocracy by appropriating it for the Left's own uses. However, when applied to Trade Union banners, rational modernist design strategies enforce instantaneous recuperation:

Basically what I did was to strip the aims of the union down to its bare ideals, using the written text of its principles on the back of the banner, so that every member could see, without reading in a book of rules, what the basic tenet of the union was: this was a progressive text stripped bare of all the mystifications of capitalism and bureaucracy.¹²

Are "progressive texts" necessarily "bare" texts? What are the "basic tenets" of a trade union? Is uncritical sloganeering not entirely foreign to the complex aims and ideals of the trade union movement? The problem with adopting such an approach in this case would seem to lie in the incompatibility of the unions' emancipatory agendas and the mesmerising imagery produced to nurture and sustain capital. Trade unions were founded to implicate radical socio-political transformations, not to promote themselves as a 'political products'. Atkinson oversimplifies matters, this time in a failed effort to *compete* with the mass-media: "If you have no ideological and cultural struggle going on you have no polemic. You allow capitalism to provide all the background noise and all the wallpaper against which the struggles are fought."¹³ While Atkinson clearly has a point, it is ironic that he should not have realised that capitalism was providing him with a formal blueprint rather than mere background noise. The business of spirited communication, is all too easily confused with the spirit of business communication, as Atkinson was only too aware: "I've always felt [...] that it's pointless to imitate the sophisticated polish and the means of capitalism if you are involved in an oppositional culture, so I was not after the smoothness of professional TV. Although I have pride in my learned skills and I am not advocating a sloppy amateurism."¹⁴

Despite the failings of these early experiments, Atkinson held his artistic convictions. Following his appointment to a Northern Arts Fellowship towards the end of 1974, he was invited by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to present an exhibition relating to life in the province. As a consequence of his belief in the "integrity of subject-matter, not of formal

¹²ibid., p18.

¹³ibid.

¹⁴ATKINSON, "Industry and Industrial Disease", in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p10.

methods of interpreting a specific object”,¹⁵ Atkinson concentrated initially on the banner and mural imagery of opposing religious and political and religious groups, finding “that the signs of the struggle were painted on the streets to an extent that they had only been seen in Britain in Notting Hill Gate in the 60s.”¹⁶ To some extent this provided a parallel with Atkinson’s earlier experiences in Cuba, where “the street images, posters, stickers and so on were all motivated toward ideals and goals with which I could identify and in which everyone could participate.”

¹⁷ The saturation of street imagery demanded that Atkinson adopt the flexible approach to form which he had also discovered in Cuba where “many of the artists had mixed several modes had used language with visual elements and had used actual objects to explain a point.”¹⁸

Atkinson spent a couple of months visiting Belfast, Armagh and Londonderry, photographing, collecting information and making videos of everything he saw. Two exhibitions followed: *A Shade of Green, An Orange Edge*, in Belfast, May 1975 and *Northern Ireland 1968; Mayday 1975*, which went on to tour the mainland Midland Group Gallery and Art Net, London in 1976. Each consisted of hundreds of colour photographs of street murals, sectarian graffiti and propaganda posters. These were supported by a number of documents, newspaper cuttings and public relations statements by official and unofficial organisations. Although many of the exhibits were set out in groups, visitors were again largely left to co-ordinate the untitled documentary photographs and information for themselves.

The evidence Atkinson has compiled builds up a cumulative picture, to be dipped into rather than read in a linear progression, of a community whose very fabric is infected with the bitterest hostilities. Wherever you look, images and statements of the most divisive kind are to be found.¹⁹

In *Northern Ireland 1968; Mayday 1975* the artist

left orange, white and green paper with pens in the gallery and asked people for their comments, not on the exhibition and the way it had been handled, but on the issues it raised. The interesting thing was that one was conscious of the hostility from the artists over there, although others were very supportive, particularly those working in the community. They criticised the exhibition for what it didn’t have in it, or for

¹⁵ ATKINSON, *Studio International*, 191, p177.

¹⁶ ATKINSON, “People’s Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976”, in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p19. See Chapter 13: *Guaranteed Disappointment* for a discussion of King Mob’s Notting Hill graffiti. This statement once more marks Atkinson as a spectator rather than a participant in the class struggle.

¹⁷ ATKINSON, *Studio International*, 191 p177.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

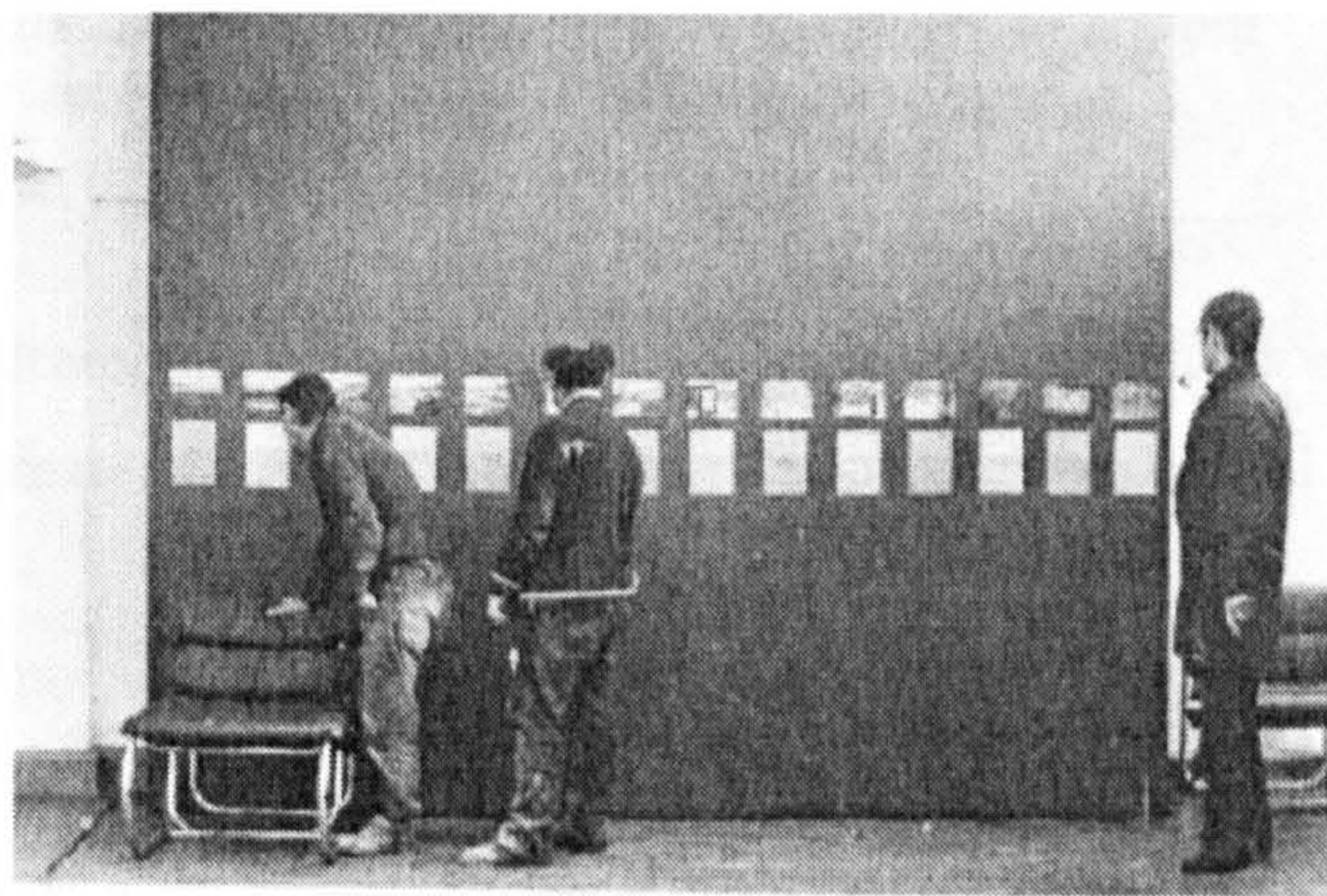
¹⁹ CORK, “Ulster : The Bitter Picture”, *Evening Standard*, London, 6th May 1976, p24.

mixing art and politics or in fact for the formal handling. But the lay public and the politicians who visited really did write about the issues.²⁰

In this, Atkinson judiciously accentuated a number of distinctions between communities who share an ‘art culture’ and those who adopt a ‘culture of politics’, a distinction that lay at the heart of the 1976 ‘crisis’ in British art. It is perhaps unsurprising that politicians should chose to “write about the issues”, but why did the “lay public” adopt a similar approach? One of the predicaments of Northern Ireland and conservative democracies in general is that politicians dictate that dominant culture should be ‘political’, conventional yet varied definitions of the ‘political’ being drawn from a rag-bag of references to religion, logical positivism, humanist ethics, capitalist economics and utilitarianism. This being the case, the question is did Atkinson help to perpetuate this situation?

...such sloganeering memento making, we believe, holds patronising and disrupting assumptions about the nature of its public. We believe it assumes a public which doesn’t have to be made but which is already out there fully formed and wants to hear these things. A public to be in its imagined universalism and not one which will learn complex things. It is a public of simple slogans; it is a public of the worlds of the Conservative and Labour Parties, the world of the *Morning Star* art critic. This is a public which will be told things, a public of fixed and petrified worthiness, and, most patronising of all, an inert band of rote-learner receivers. This public learns nothing but rote, a public which is powerless to proselytise and, in the end, reason for itself. This is deeply patronising.²¹

It could, then, be argued that Atkinson maintained a (modernist) disinterest in people’s interests, a disinterest which was not altogether different from the State’s indifference. Both Conservative and Labour Governements, for example, are fond of ballots because they are inefficacious substitutes for democratic processes (such as anarcho-syndicalism, democratic socialism or federal republicanism). It is only important that people contribute so that the illusion of a participative democracy can be sustained. Much could be said of Atkinson’s participative art works.



Installation of A Shade of Green in Belfast 1975
Figure 3.1 Viewing Northern Ireland 1968; Mayday 1975

²⁰ATKINSON, “People’s Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976”, in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p21.

²¹SUSAN AND TERRY ATKINSON, “British Political Art at Coventry”, *Mute I*, Galleri Prag, Copenhagen; Orchard Gallery, Derry; Gimpel Fils, London, 1988, p16.

In Atkinson's defence, Caroline Tisdall suggested that artists often take a defensive stance when confronted with issues, preventing them from seeing the wood for the trees. This view implies an overly simplistic base/superstructure model, in that it helps to continue the alleged separation of culture (superstructure) and politics (economic base). However, as a rough map, this model can have its uses. Indeed, the hostility that Atkinson received from Irish artists was most likely to have arisen since they felt that the producers of an alien 'political culture' threatened their activities as artists. On the one hand, conservative practitioners, manipulable and marginalized through self-identification with the term 'artist' and all it implies, would have feared an end to the mystification of their practice. Others, however, may have wished to defend the artworld as a counter (political) cultural sphere. In effect, Atkinson neither promoted nor criticised the culture of politics, he merely choose to connote and encourage active rather than passive engagement with the issues at hand:

In my view there is a difference between a genuinely participatory work made by people in a particular situation, and a work which attempts from a different viewpoint to analyse that situation using those people's experience. I think that in the first five years of the 70s many artists confused the difference between participation and taking the responsibility for the particular viewpoint that was expressed. The problem being that you have to be a specialist in order to demystify the media from form.²²

Atkinson's refusal to accept responsibility for his use of other people's imagery or to precisely define his 'political' position was much maligned,²³ yet it indicates a complexity of attitude:

I see the role of the artist as similar to a person who gets up at a conference and makes a point at length based on his or her personal and his or her understanding of other people's experience. What he or she says is not something that can be immediately transformed into a party line or manifesto. The artist is not there to say yes or no, but as a participant in a creative series of debates which may in the end contribute to theory, and whose motivation is not to begin by illustrating a theory.²⁴

Far from being a producer of political culture, this suggests that Atkinson wished to defend 'art' as a counter cultural sphere, an indeterminate realm that might foster socio-political-cultural alternatives:

²²ATKINSON, "People's Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976", in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p21.

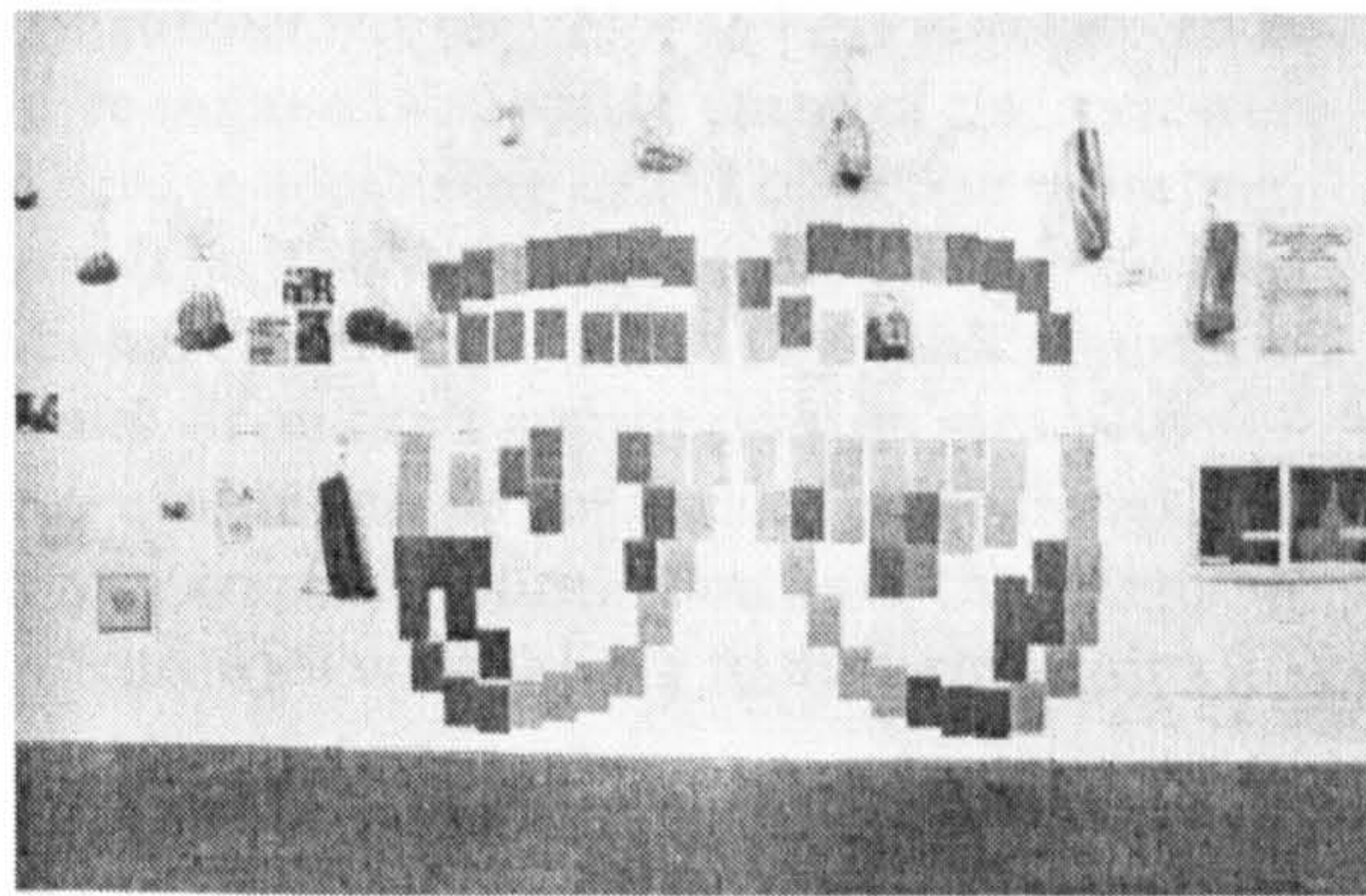
²³"If we should happen to think that the injustices animating him as an artist might be rectified by the application of (let's say) more enlightened self-interest, or the removal of artificial constraints from the free play of market forces, and shall not be certain why he denies it. The buried foundations of his advertised 'Marxism' are as obscure at the surface of his speech as those of his art-theoretical or aesthetic position. There is far too much taken for granted, for a thesis on art and politics." DONALD BROOK, "Reflections on 'The State of Art: The Art of the State'", *Art Monthly*, No. 72, December/January 1983/83, p3.

²⁴ATKINSON, "People's Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976", in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p21.

The strongest point in Atkinson's favour is his skill in contrasting apparently blank material. As an artist he keeps fairly much in the background so that he becomes a kind of agent for this information. In a way it's a strategy to encourage people to consider once more the basic anomalies they've just become immune or resigned to, or just plain forgotten.²⁵

In other works of this period Atkinson continued to turn his attention towards modern-day political horrors, writing these issues into history by using high culture. Major world affairs were tackled such as *Solidarity with Chile* (1974), and starvation in the Third World (*Hunger* 1975-78). At the same time, Atkinson's exposure of the mercury poisoning of the women involved in *Strike at Brannans* led to his support for other workers suffering from industrial disease. *Iron Ore* (1977), documented the case for compensating a number of Cleator Moor iron ore miners, using the case of Billy

Hunter, suffering from the chest disease pneumoconiosis, and the plight of Josie, his widow left struggling to cope with compensation claims, to draw out the problems. A critique of the callousness of multinational industries came the following year, *Asbestos* (1978) [Figure 3.2], focusing on the mesothelioma



poisoning of Henry Vaughan, and his wife Mary, who contracted asbestosis by breathing in the dust from her husband's moustache. What the West Cumbrians had got for a lifetime of hard work, Atkinson revealed, 'was a disabling disease, no money, and an environment left like a moonscape.'

For Allan Wallach, the central problem of such work revolved around the problematic delineated by *Art for Whom?* The disparity between the artist's political intentions and the context in which his work was exhibited was seen to create a barrier to its critical effectiveness:

The gallery space is not a neutral, transparent medium through which one looks at works of art. The space carries an ideological charge of its own. [...] ...modern gallery spaces are devoted to a type of ritual activity. That activity might be described as aesthetic contemplation.²⁶

Despite Wallach's contention that "the central problem [of Atkinson's work] was not presentation", the problem of the gallery environment would seem to be related to Atkinson's use of the tableaux form, hanging the materials on the wall to produce something that

²⁵TISDALL, "Art of Work", *Arts Guardian*, April 1974.

²⁶ALLAN WALLACH, "Conrad Atkinson: The Dilemma of Political Art", *Arts Magazine*, 54, December 1979, 153.

resembled the clutter of Victorian panoramic museums. Bonding together such a diverse range of related motifs created an information overload, forcing viewers to develop concerns with the spaces between objects. There was always the risk here, however, that the tableaux would become of primary interest as an innocuous and ahistorical 'Cabinet of Curiosities'.²⁷

Documenting events in such a detached manner had to lead to the 'content' of political events being disengaged from the ways in which they emerged as a contest of conflicting value systems. In the tableaux, the events seemed to take place outwith such palpable contradictory configurations, despite being illustrations of argumentative structures. Were audiences being presented with a gallery of bodiless victims designed to placate their bourgeois habits of living by proxy, undergoing the catharsis of political edification in a public art gallery?

It's very difficult not to exploit this kind of subject matter. Not to be a voyeur. To be an objective onlooker; though that would be impossible because some of the men were my friends. But we are conditioned to believe in something called objective reporting, in which you view people as insects or rats. The BBC calls it balance, I suppose. This is where finding the right form of oppositional culture comes in. You can't appropriate the methods of capitalism to expose its faults. You can't appropriate its means to create a new way of seeing things. There are bound to be residues of other things, like religion, maybe, in what emerges because you are not reborn. You have the weight of capitalism's bizarre representations to contend with so you have to undermine this too.²⁸

Against this, Atkinson continued to advocate the theory that dislocating events from their automatic political milieu would give viewers the freedom to recombine and recontextualise on a critical level, thereby denying the notion of history as a coherent narrative strung together from traces of the past. Indeed, would heeding Wallach's demand that political art needed a "different type of space - a political meeting room, a union hall or meeting room, a worker's club or residence, etc."²⁹ not simply have led to preaching to the converted? A more sophisticated critique came from the theory and practice of A&L, for whom the "repulsive idealisations of *Art for Society*"³⁰ were "primitive embarrassments."³¹ A paper was delivered and discussed

²⁷See DAVID CARRIER, "The Origins of museums, the cabinet of curiosities in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe", *Leonardo* v. 20 No.1, 1987 p. 83-6. and PETER MUNK, "Karel van Mander III. Court painter, collector and steward of the cabinet of curiosities", *Apollo*, London, no. 128, August 1988, p. 88-92.

²⁸ATKINSON, "Industry and Industrial Disease", in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p14.

²⁹WALLACH, prev. cit.

³⁰CHARLES HARRISON and FRED ORTON, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, Editions E. Fabre, Paris, April 1982, p62.

³¹"There were more primitive embarrassments. A towering man of the age - 'Conrad' rather than 'Terry' Atkinson succeeded in demonstrating to the world that he was in a position to prove conclusively that the Queen Mother was an aristocrat..." MEL RAMSDEN, "Art & Language: Mike Baldwin and Mel

by Baldwin, Harrison, Pilkington and Ramsden at the Whitechapel Art Gallery during May 1978³² in which Cork's *Art for Society* exhibition³³ was criticised for having "become a rallying point of the self-promotional activities of the soi-disant left (typified by the 'socialist artist' Conrad Atkinson's fearless expose of the Queen Mother as an aristocrat)." ³⁴

Notwithstanding Wallach and A&L's misgivings, political art could and did have an impact on ritual meaning of the gallery space. Cork's *Art For Society* ran into a great deal of controversy when a number of artists had their work excluded from the exhibition as it reached Northern Ireland. When work arrived and began to be unpacked some of the Museum's attendants were concerned by the nature of particular works, and threatened to boycott the show. It was reported that over 40 of the men intended to take action, and, ironically, had official General and Municipal Workers' Union support.³⁵ The 'cultural paramilitaries' who ran the Ulster Museum made the following statement on the 9th November, 1978:

The Trustees of the Ulster museum believe it is the duty of this institution - a national museum representing all the citizens of Northern Ireland - to be apolitical. [...] When the exhibits were unpacked and had been inspected by the Trustees it was unanimously decided that a number of items were unsuitable for display.³⁶

Atkinson's general presentation of the 'troubles', John Pakenham's anti-paramilitary paintings, Hugh Alexander's collage *I Study Violence*, Margaret Harrison's factual painted collage about rape, its nature and treatment under law, and Alexis Hunter's satirical look at the stereotype of the muscle-bound male were all cited as possible casualties. However, the following day the G.M.W.U. made a statement saying that they were not involved in the attendants' threat of action. After the matter had engaged the attention of *The Times*, and its letter columns, *Time Out* and other publications, the Ulster Museum and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Ramsden, Extracts from a Conversation with Sandra Miller", *Artscribe*, No.47, July/August 1984, p15. Baldwin and Ramsden were referring to Atkinson's *Thalidomide: Anniversary Print for the Queen Mother* (1977), which exposed what amounted to a Royal seal of approval for multinational United Distilleries profiteering at the expense of Thalidomide victims.

³²See ART & LANGUAGE, "Art for Society?", *Art-Language* Vol.4 No.4, Art & Language Press, June 1980.

³³ Cork's title closely parallels *Art for the People*, an exhibition of photographs of mural paintings held by the anti-fascist Artists International Association (AIA) at the Whitechapel in 1939. See R.RADFORD *Art for a Purpose: The Artists International Association, 1933-1953*, Winchester, 1987. As I point out in the following chapter, many of the mural painters supported by Cork thought that they were living through similarly bleak cultural and economic times as the AIA.

³⁴HARRISON and ORTON, Editions E. Fabre, Paris, April 1982, p61.

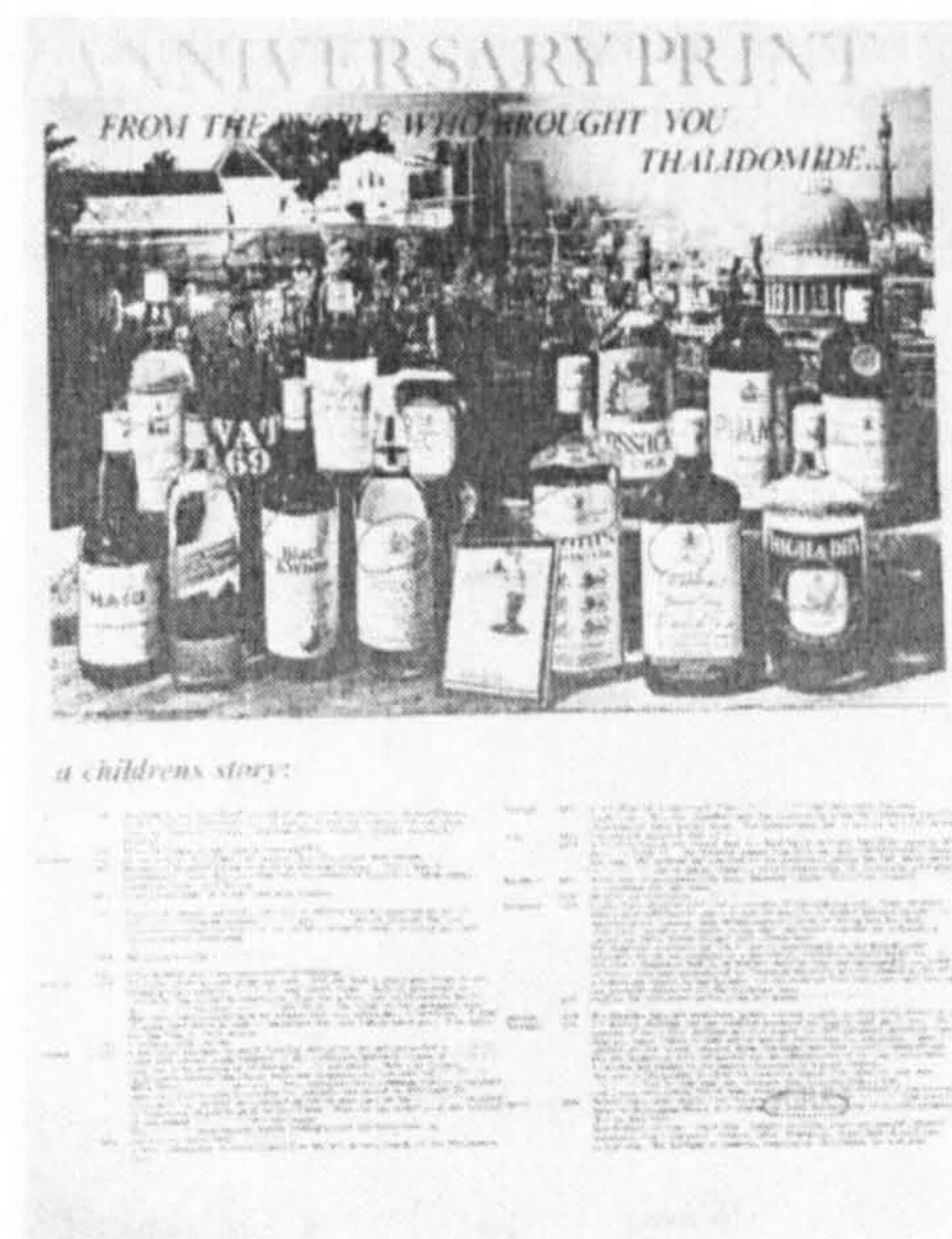
³⁵Anon. "An Exhibition Censored", 10th November, 1978, reprinted in "O God! O Ulster!", *Art Monthly*, No. 22, 1978-79, p21-22.

³⁶ULSTER MUSEUM, "Press Release", 9th November, 1978, *ibid*.

decided to present the show in two sections. Atkinson's work in Northern Ireland was, to some extent, successful, the scandal surrounding its censorship drawing people's attention to the issues such as the Bill of Rights debate on which the Labour government had been operating a censure.

Atkinson's career was soon to achieve more notoriety. In 1979 Atkinson's *Thalidomide* series and Tony Rickaby's painted investigations of right-wing organisations in London were withdrawn from the British Arts Council's *Lives: An Exhibition of Artists Whose Work is Based on Other People's Lives* "because the Council was advised that their display might lead to action in the courts."³⁷ Given the nature of its subject matter, it is ironic that the only political controversy generated by the exhibition should have come from banning Atkinson and Rickaby's works. Atkinson's *Silver Liberties, a Souvenir of a Wonderful Anniversary Year* (1977) was produced in response to the Silver Jubilee celebrations, when the conservative press went to enormous lengths to encourage the British public to commemorate twenty-five years of a redundant autocracy.

[Figure 3.3 Conrad Atkinson *Anniversary Print* (1977) This print highlights the use of the royal seal on United Distillers' products. United Distillers, manufacturers of Thalidomide, were, at this time, refusing to compensate their victims. The print was offered as a gift to the Queen Mother on the 150th Anniversary of UCL.]



Atkinson focused attention on what lay behind the facade of the 1977 celebrations, a year which started with atrocities in Northern Ireland and ended in the same way. The emphasis was on British militarism and violation of civil rights, and the erosion of civil rights on the mainland. Associated with this were the tortures that were taking place in Castlereagh Police Station, through to Steve Biko and back to the murder of Durham electrician Liddle Towers, who died in hospital after being kicked by police when found drunk in Newcastle.³⁸ The opportunity to represent the Arts Council as yet another reactionary Ideological State Apparatus was something of a convenience designed to affirm the continued radicality of Atkinson's work. Naively, the Arts Council took the bait, closing Atkinson's web of

³⁷DEREK BOSHIER, "Statement", *Lives: An Exhibition of Artists Whose Work is Based on Other Peoples' Lives, Selected by Derek Boshier*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979.

³⁸ATKINSON, "People's Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976", in TISDALL & NAIRNE, p22.

conspirators by fortuitously implicating itself in the British atrocities of the late 1970s, withdrawing work without consulting the artists or curator. If banning this controversial work imparted it with a degree of belated vehemence, its notoriety, critical edge and satirical bite were severely lacking when compared with Jamie Reid's subvertisms for the Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen*.³⁹ It might be argued that, like the Sex Pistols, Atkinson briefly avoided being assimilated by the establishment. Unlike the Sex Pistols, however, Atkinson *unwittingly* packaged his dissent, as the scandal primarily drew attention to himself. As the correspondence pages of arts magazines were filled once more with letters criticising the debacle, the issues raised by Atkinson's work were gradually obscured by the 'big question' of the late 1970s: who ran the artworld? Atkinson's analysis of the situation was startlingly prophetic:

...the Arts Council of Great Britain is attempting to move into a dominating and decisive role (e.g. 'inescapable editorial responsibility') in the arts in preparation for the eighties. This will, I believe, see a 'tightening up' of the 'problematic' areas of art practice, particularly, though not exclusively, in the visual arts. Thus the work funded will be more populist (towards a visual arts 'Cross-roads'). In my opinion this will affect work in all media but most vulnerable will be documentation, work with socio-political content, performance work and work which is contentious and moves outside the accepted norms.⁴⁰

³⁹See Chapter 14 Decline of the English Avant-Garde.

⁴⁰ATKINSON, "Correspondence: 'Lives' Lives", *Art Monthly*, No. 27, 1979, p28.

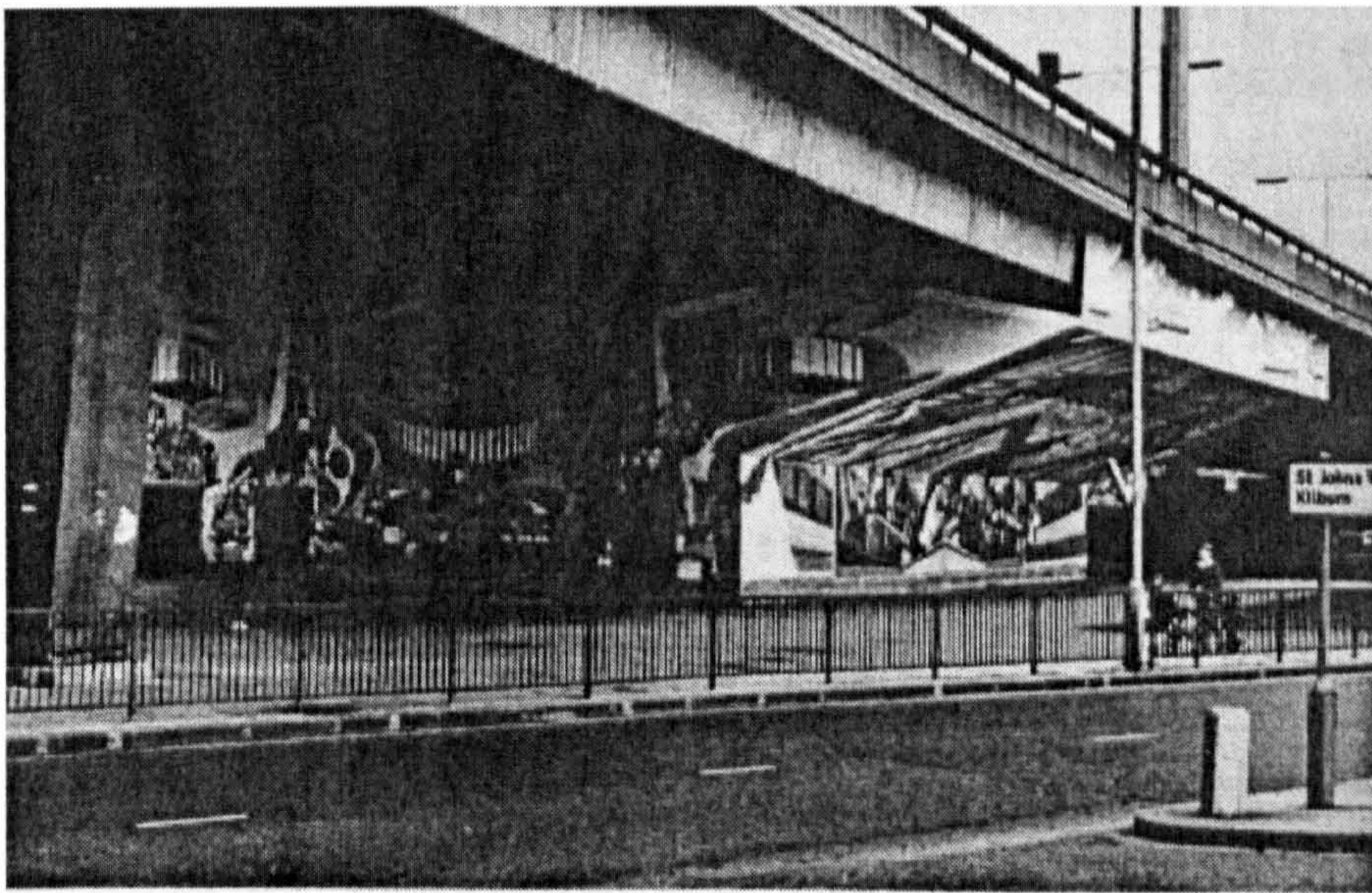
CHAPTER 4

Fart for Peace

Any word would do, FART might be appropriate if not original. Immediacy is important to many of us, making things to do with what's happening now.¹

The crisis in fine art practice is not merely a question of the crisis in professionalism: it's a crisis in knowing what to paint.²

I prefer to describe them as 'Social Functionalists'. I intend a certain irony in this label. [...] ...the primary social function of 'Social Functionalism' is that it keeps some artists who would otherwise be out of work in grants and on the streets.³



On October 16th, 1977, two years after its conception, Arthur Latham M.P. opened what was then the largest exterior mural in Britain, unveiling a plaque dedicated to 'The Working People of Paddington'. Desmond Rochfort's *The Construction Workers* and David Binnington's *Office Work*, painted on adjacent sides of one of the main supporting piers of the Westways Urban Motorway, were intended to offer a 'restorative' to the graffiti defaced surfaces which form the concrete complex of under and over passes adjoining the Harrow Road [Figure 4.1]. For Binnington and Rochfort, the initial attraction of the site in April 1975 lay in its potential for establishing a large powerful image addressing a predominately working class audience.

¹PHIL GOODALL, "Growing Point/Pains in 'Feministo'", 1977, reprinted in ROZSIKA PARKER and GRISELDA POLLOCK, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Woman's Movement 1970-1985*, , Pandora, London, 1987, p213.

² DESMOND ROCHFORD, "The Crisis in Professionalism", *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p85.

³PETER FULLER, "Social Functionalism", *Art Monthly*, Number 19, September 1978, p27.

This was only acceptable to the Greater London Council provided that Binnington and Rochfort's Public Art Workshop could both properly finance the project and have the designs passed by the relevant planning authorities. With the Workshop's obvious financial limitations the creation of 4,500 square feet of murals required a large amount of aid. The aspiring muralists turned to the Royal Academy Schools, where they were trained as painters. The Royal Academy of Arts' E. Vincent Harris Fund for mural decoration provided an initial budget of £2,000 on the conditions that the final designs were acceptable to the trustees and that the paintings were executed using a permanent paint type.

Having rejected accepted painting systems such as acrylics, oil and emulsion, as being unsuitable for an exterior environment, Binnington and Rochfort visited the Courtauld Institute of Art's Department of Technology, where Professor Rees-Jones outlined the Keim paint system based on a cement silicate compound developed in Germany in 1877. The use of the flake-free Keim silicate system, which has a life of over eighty years, drastically increased the cost of materials. Not only were such paints expensive, but their use necessitated the prior application of a special layer of porous white cement which would then render the wall compatible with the paint. As a result the budget rose from £2,000 to well over £8,000. After a long campaign, the Arts Council agreed to provide £5,000 to assist the venture. Binnington and Rochfort decided to commence work in full knowledge that £7,000 would definitely not be enough to complete the project. By November 1976 another contribution of £1,000 was received from the E. Vincent Harris Fund, and finally a substantial Arts Council grant of £3,000 was acquired in April 1977, by which time the budget had risen from its initial conception of £3,000 to £14,000!

As members of *Artery's* editorial board, Rochfort and Binnington quickly found the critical support of Jeff Sawtell, the editor of *Artery*, a magazine dedicated to providing a platform for class-conscious working -class expression in the Arts. Sawtell praised the workshop in his editorial ('Comment' *Artery*, No.13) and in *Artscribe*.⁴ The debate quickly moved to the pages of mainstream publishing competitors *Art Monthly*. In April 1978, Cork welcomed the murals as providing "an object lesson in how publicly-sighted paintings can gain great resonance from their settings, unlike easel pictures which are so often compromised and abused by the locations in which they are displayed."⁵ Cork evidently wished the new Muralism to retain the critical standpoint of avant-garde art, (an avant-garde which he now allegedly deplored.) The crucial difference for Cork, however, lay in the context in which this criticism was received: "A work of art in a gallery is confined by a whole host of limitations - narrowness of audience, of viewing possibilities, of future as a collector's private possession -

⁴See GLYN JONES, "Mur al, mural its, mural ism", *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p32-33.

⁵RICHARD CORK, "The Royal Oak Murals", *Art Monthly*, Number 15, April 1978, p10.

which do not affect the street mural at all.”⁶ While Cork *may* have been correct to imply that the muralists differed from gallery artists in taking their inspiration from the public locale in which they worked, the financial history of the paintings reveals that they were just as compromised as gallery works. Hence, in defiance of Cork’s declarations, Sarah Kent justly pointed out that murals were just as susceptible to “establishment pressure”⁷ as any other form of art. Yet to Kent the Royal Oak Murals could never have been a paragon of endeavour, since they were “pathetic”⁸ examples of pseudo-Socialist Realism which appeared tawdry in terms of imagination and execution even when compared with the most elementary of gallery modernisms.

In some senses, this was a rather unfair assertion. Neither of the Royal Oak muralists sought a visual equivalent of music hall. On the one hand, Rochfort’s style was particularly influenced by Stanley Spencer, Leger and Giotto, his construction workers “fall into several groups, with distinct gestures and character which Giotto lends his figures, like a tableau vivant, against the background of cranes and girders.”⁹

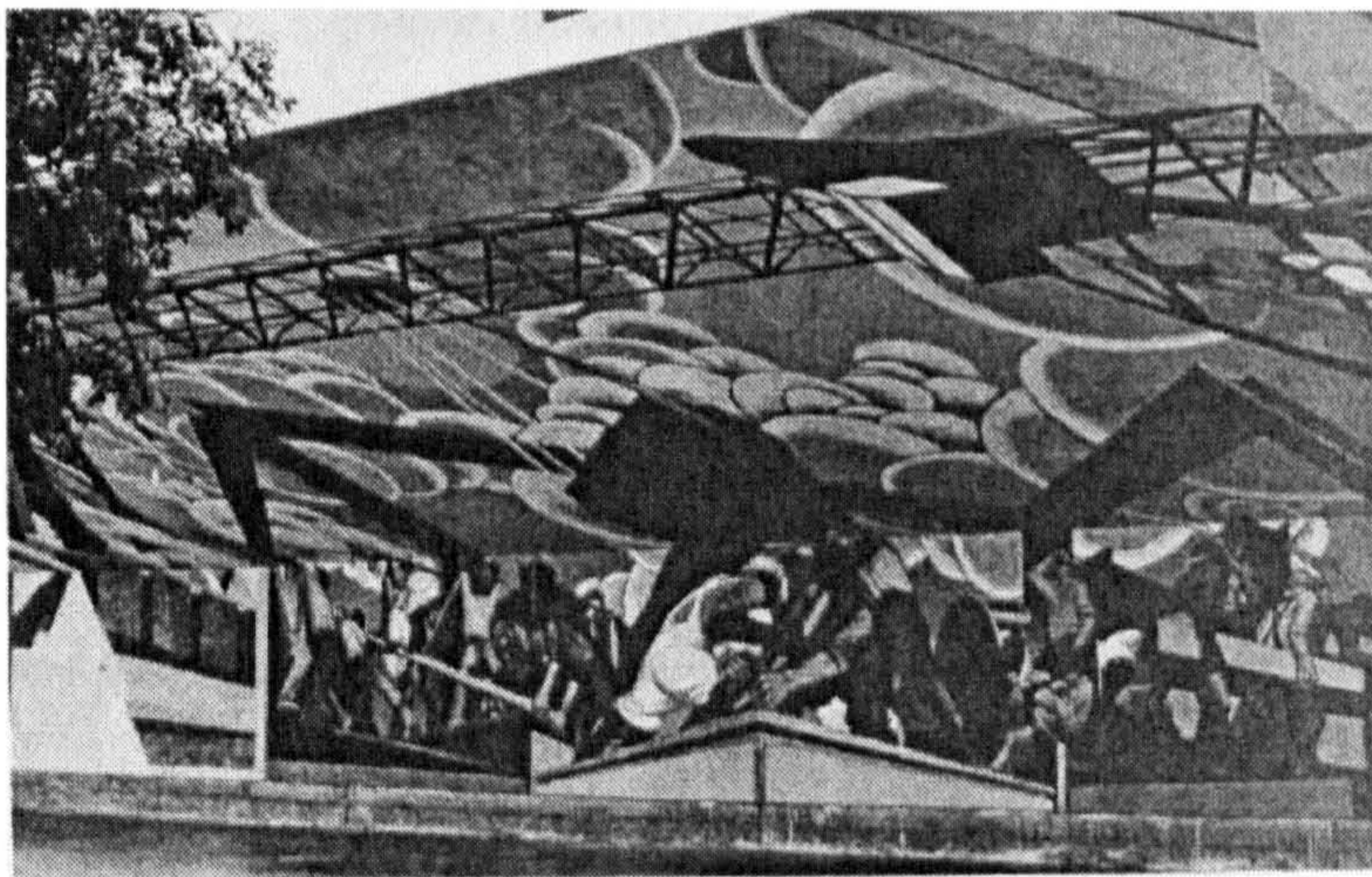


Figure 4.2 Desmond Rochfort, *The Construction Workers*, (1976-78).

On the other, Binnington’s mural engaged with the ideas of William Morris and Georg Grosz concerning the disaffection of modern workers. Kent’s metropolitan modernist myopia missed the obvious fact that both members of the Public Art Workshop were resolutely inspired by Mexican Muralists of the 1930s such as David Siquieros, Diego Rivera and José Orozco.¹⁰

⁶ibid.

⁷SARAH KENT, “Why Not Popular”, *The State of British Art*, ICA, London, 10th - 12th February 1978. Reprinted in *Studio International*, Volume 194, Number 988, 2/1978, p120.

⁸ibid.

⁹MALCOLM MILES, “Community Murals in Britain”, *Art for Public Places*, Winchester School of Art Press, Winchester, 1989, p72.

¹⁰It is very likely that Rochfort and Binnington believed that they were working in the midst of a similar economic and cultural crisis that Rivera had experienced when working on the USA’s Federal Art Project in the early 1930s. See JONATHAN HARRIS, “Capitalist Crisis and Artistic Culture During the 1930s: New Deal ‘democratic realism’”, in PAUL WOOD, FRANCIS FRASCINA, JONATHAN HARRIS,

This at least should have been apparent to Kent given that Rochfort wrote at length on the subject.¹¹ However, to those initiated with the history of Muralism, it could also be recognised by formally examining their work.

All true architectonic space, whether indoors or out, concave or convex, is a machine, and its parts, such as the walls, floor, arches, ceiling etc. are the wheels of this machine which must be seen as a machine which moves rhythmically with a geometric play of infinite intensity. It is essential to make use of this phenomena in mural painting. Anyone who paints murals without taking this into account is not really a mural painter.¹²

Heeding Siqueros' advice, we could argue that Kent failed to take into consideration the reality that murals are designs rather than 'paintings'. Successful muralists do not rely exclusively upon artisanal dexterity, but upon their ability to design two-dimensional images with architectural considerations. Following Siqueiros, Binnington and Rochfort worked in recognition that the limits of the picture plane of a mural must be the limits of the building itself. Both muralists therefore explicitly dealt with the physical reality of the walls when designing their murals. The angular tiers of Binnington's east wall were corroborated, being used to add to the dynamism of his polyangular composition, (a structural characteristic of Siqueros' work), using a painted archway to correspond with the real archway in front, thereby giving the impression that the scene is taking place under the motorway. The doors on Binnington's wall were also handled in a creative way, being transformed into office filing cabinets.

The 30-degree cantilevered sections of Rochfort's north wall lent themselves even more readily to his dynamic polyangular panorama of scaffolding, reinforcing the expressive power and heroic monumentality of his Realist subject. Rochfort's rejection of Albertian perspective

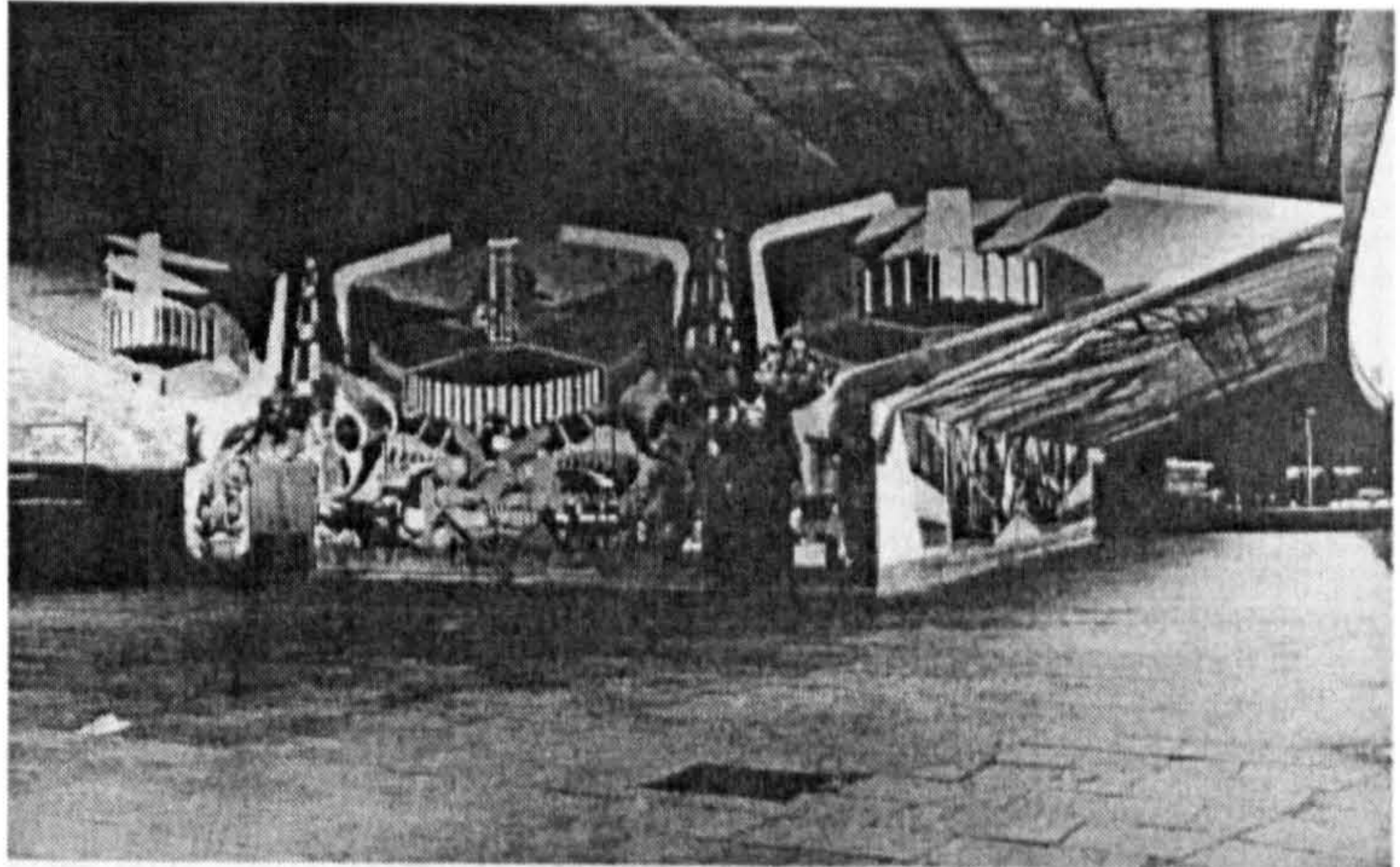
CHARLES HARRISON, *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*, Yale University Press, 1993, p25-27. Furthermore, their political affiliations (members of the Communist Party of Great Britain) and influences (Mexican Muralism) directly parallels the muralism of the Artists International Association, founded in Britain in 1933 in response to the rise of fascism. See R.RADFORD *Art for a Purpose: The Artists International Association, 1933-1953*, Winchester, 1987; RADFORD, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists International Association, 1933-1953*, Winchester, 1987; TATE GALLERY *Mural Painting in Great Britain 1919-1939: An Exhibition of Photographs*, London, 1939. LYNDIA MORRIS and RADFORD, *The Story of the Artists International Association*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1983. Following the completion of the Royal Oak Murals in 1978, the Greenwich Mural Workshop embarked upon a scheme commemorating *The Battle of Cable Street*, (1978-83) on the flank wall of St. George's Town Hall, Cable Street, Tower Hamlets, London. While again pointing directly to the 1930s parallel with the late 1970s and early 1980s, this proved to be more relevant and controversial than the Royal Oak scheme, especially given the number of race riots during the period of its genesis, (e.g. Lewisham in 1977 and Brixton in 1981.) See C. KENNA *Murals in London*, London, 1985; and KENNA and LOBB, *Mural Manual*, London, 1985.

¹¹ROCHFORD, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueros*, London, 1993.

¹²DIEGO SEQUEIROS, "How to Paint a Mural", *Art and Revolution*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, p125.

reinforced recognition of the architectural support, enveloping the viewer and forcing them to recognise their own dynamic relativity in front of the large wall.

Figure 4.3 David Binnington,
Office Work, (1976-78)



Peter Fuller, recognising the historical precedents that appeared to escape Kent, was nevertheless as sceptical as ever:

I regard the Westway murals as essentially *formalist* in character. They are derived primarily in relation to other works of art (especially Siquieros' hideously rhetorical Stalinist nightmares); they show no discernible attempt to make art through giving plastic expression to lived experience in the world, in its actuality and becoming. Other commentators have pointed out that the way in which Rochfort depicts labour can relate neither to the way Paddington construction workers experience it now nor (one hopes) to any potentiality within labour which may be realised within the possible historical future. The Westway is a montage of art-book clichés, most of which were false when they were first devised, and which are double false when reproduced in west London today.¹³

Of course, this aids Kent's claim that, in their use of multiple viewpoints, Binnington and Rochfort had simply transplanted cubo-futurist space onto a motorway flyover, with less complex results. It was along these lines that Cork's formalist assertions were also flatly rejected in the pro-Modernist journal *Artscribe*, in which David Sweet pronounced that "the new social role tendered to the artist is not that of the artist at all, but that of the illustrator/decorator, and it is against this vision and the spirit of philistinism which pervades it, that the principles of Modernism stand."¹⁴ Cork countered by stressing the point that the Royal Oak murals were not "simply whimsical decorations brightening up an oppressive locale."

[Binnington] chose [...] to confront a central aspect of city life on its own harsh level. The result, far from applying ornamental bandages to areas that desperately need radical social surgery, appears to grow forcefully out of the dehumanised wasteland so evident all around.¹⁵

¹³FULLER, "Social Functionalism", p27.

¹⁴DAVID SWEET, "Artists v The Rest: The New Philistines", *Artscribe* 11, April 1978, p38.

¹⁵CORK, "The Royal Oak Murals", *Art Monthly*, No. 15, 1978, p 10-11. Cork here echoes Binnington's view of other mural schemes of the mid-1970s: "[The Eyesights Project] conceived by the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) and sponsored by Thames Television in 1975, was a

Yet it can be argued that such claims do justly hold against all pictorialist mid-70s mural schemes. The Scottish Arts Council's Gable End Mural scheme begun in 1974, commissioned four murals as a means of patching up the ends of tenement blocks severed by new motorways running through the heart of Glasgow.¹⁶ John Byrne's primitivist 'Patrick' painting *Boy on Dog Back*, James Torrance's vernacular *Celtic Knot*, Stan Bell's abstract *Hex*, and John McColl's comically colloquial *Klah P II* (a homage to the enormous horse mussels devoured in the West of Scotland) were blow ups of gallery art previously exhibited at the Glasgow League of Artists. The works were an undoubted success in so far as they provided a way of involving communities that had been broken up by the new road schemes, encouraging children to participate in their realisation, something that the Public Art Workshop scorned.¹⁷ While being far from discreet the murals were a vast improvement on the fascistic monuments of imperialist tobacco barons customarily favoured by Glasgow City Council, although they guilefully harboured all the nostalgic qualities of Scots folk culture needed to sell them to the narcissistic Second City.¹⁸

According to Cork, its popularity notwithstanding, the Glasgow pilot scheme still failed in that it did not take into account the ways in which Muralism made it possible to stress the integral relationship between the artwork and its surroundings in terms of both structure and subject matter. The structuralist claim would seem to stand up. As we have seen, the limits of the picture plane of the East and North Walls of the Royal Oak flyover were clearly

simplistic attempt to take art from the gallery context and give it to a wider working-class audience. The scheme basically was to select designs from those submitted to GLAA and plaster the East End with these images using commercial advertising hoardings. Much to the surprise of the organisers, the residents of Tower Hamlets received this benevolent act of patronage with considerable hostility. A local campaign against the project succeeded in stopping it, and the protest's organisers went on from this to found one of the most progressive, effective and comparatively well financed borough Arts councils in Britain. [...] Eyesights failed, and failed magnificently, for it assumed that all that was necessary to give an avant-garde art a genuine social function was to liberate it from the gallery confines and patronisingly give it to a working-class audience. They were reminded quite ungraciously that established working-class communities have a culture, an art and a series of quite legitimate demands for their artists." DAVID BINNINGTON, "A Genuine Social Function for Artists: A Dream or a Reality", *Art for Whom?*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, p56.

¹⁶"The first gables were completed within a budget of about £1,000-£1,200..." *Art Monthly*, Number 21, November 1978, p31.

¹⁷"...the admission under questioning, that the Westway muralists really didn't want members of the community working alongside them and preferred post hoc comments to prompter hoc consultations that would allow the community to determine what the community had to look at on its wall..." PETER TOWNSEND, "Editor's Elongated Note [*Art for Whom? Discussion*], *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p23.

¹⁸"These murals and the thinking that goes along with them can be found anywhere in Britain. They are merely decorative motifs placed upon sad gable ends, there to gloss over the slum playgrounds of a city, about as meaningful as a billboard and telling as many lies, saying 'this is art'; at best it is a pretty picture competently executed. They do not point in any way to the social and political changes happening in this country." EILEEN LAWRENCE, "Greenberg's Scotland", *Art Monthly*, Number 15, 1978, p30.

determining factors of the physical limits of the paintings, while the Glasgow murals were basically enlarged easel pictures. However, Cork's second claim, that Muralism made it possible to stress the integral relationship between the artwork and its surroundings in terms of *subject matter* is entirely erroneous. Cork described Binnington's east wall mural as a "remorselessly satirical panorama of office life" designed to be seen by "people going to their jobs and returning home via Royal Oak tube Station."¹⁹ At the centre of *Office Work* sits an imperialist eagle with a machine cog for a heart, a symbol of multinational capitalism's technological aggression often used by Siquieros. Below this, huge thrusting hands grab a number of smaller cogwheels presumably intended to represent piece-workers, while nearby Bosses leer at rows of identical secretaries, executives snore, and automaton-like figures stamp documents. There is little doubt that Binnington intended to pillory issues and problems facing white collar workers: bureaucracy, sexism, boredom and the illusion of security and material wealth. The extent to which such issues demanded to be examined on a motorway flyover, and the extent to which they were examined by their 'audience' is questionable.²⁰ Despite Rochfort and Binnington's consultation work,²¹ the predominately working class populace coming and going to their daily employment rightly did not take kindly to being patronised by artists as to the nature of their professional activities. Binnington's *Office Work* has deservedly suffered more from graffiti than *The Construction Workers*:

Office Work has two negative factors. It occupies the wall facing the only large, traffic free paved area in the immediate vicinity: and its language is lacking in humanity. Its theme is the way office work dehumanises employees, but it illustrates this by placing a large wheel in the centre, supporting an American eagle and British lion. People are reduced to rather marginal and 'cardboard roles'. It may be that work under capitalism is alienating, but this mural uses a language mirroring that

¹⁹CORK, "The Royal Oak Murals", *Art Monthly*, No. 15, 1978, p 10-11.

²⁰ "Rochfort: Tell me, what do you think of it - do you like it? Lady: I think it's very good, very clever. Rochfort: Do you know what it's about? Lady: No Rochfort: When you go past it, what is the thing that you first notice about it? Lady: Well, I couldn't actually tell you, really, because I only just look at the colours really. I couldn't tell you what it was all on there. Man: Well, I don't know much about it, but it looks all right, it looks nice. It cheers the place up a bit. The flyover don't look nice, but with that it looks a bit decent. I don't mind it but don't know much about it. I walk past it every day and I just look at it. But I don't know much about painting, to be honest with you. Elderly man: It's quite beautiful. It's cheerful, and the canvases didn't cost anything did they? Rochfort: Do you know what it's about? Elderly man: No, that's what intrigues me, you see. I'm not quite sure about that. But it looks very, very cheerful and colourful, you know. Rochfort: What do you *think* it's about? Elderly man: (after a long pause) Ah, you beat me there." CORK, "The Art We Deserve?: Transcript of a Film by Richard Cork, directed by Jeremy Marre for the Arts Council of Great Britain, shown at the ICA at 7pm on 8th November 1978" *Artscribe*, No. 20, November 1979, p51.

²¹The designs were shown and discussed by democratic organisations within the district before being displayed on the site where the public was asked to write down their impressions.

alienation, which cannot therefore engage the spectator in human sympathy. It can only lecture the passer-by, being more rhetoric than narrative.²²

The sorrow and the pity of the (unalienated) public artist for the alienated white collar clones. Such apocalyptic thematic concerns were largely founded on condescending and outmoded aesthetic predicates, the romantic never-never land of a blue-collar workers' paradise. They were also completely out of touch with the nihilistic punk aesthetic of their time. In his essay for the *Art for Whom?* catalogue, Binnington began by recalling how on "a concrete buttress supporting the Hammersmith Flyover, an unknown spraycan poet has inscribed the [active nihilist] words 'fart for peace'"²³ Binnington, utterly failing to see the *real* irony here, went on to point out how this "call for seemingly ineffective action in support of a worthy cause has a deceptive similarity to the current calls for a more relevant social function for the artist."²⁴ In fact, the graffiti which would be painted over had far more credibility as public art than the productions of the Public Art Workshop, being an accurately droll encapsulation of many of the dilemmas and incongruities of political radicalism in 1970s Britain, the decade in which insurgency became profitable not just as a sign value: from Che Guevara Chic to Punk militant diletantism. What was particularly astute about such mordant spraypaint reviews of the 70s subcultural *zeitgeist* was that they questioned artists' rights to *have* a point of view on white-collar existence. Social artists, on the other hand, generally remained uncritical of their *own* meta-class status. Was their sneering, anti-bourgeois stance just another form of aesthetic apartheid?

The overweening idealism of the Royal Oak Murals would seem to corroborate this view. According to Cork, there was an alleged 'dialectic' between Binnington's expressionist style and Rochfort's "unashamedly heroic idiom, showing muscular limbs straining at their tasks against an open blue sky. Instead of being crushed beneath manipulative powers, these men appear to be in charge of their own destinies and purposefully forging a new future."²⁵ Rochfort's mural on the North Wall, depicting the blue-collar labour of the (male) construction worker - whose work was both physical and dangerous, and increasingly unnecessary in post-industrial society - begged to be ridiculed. It was precisely this variety of idealist, macho, deterministic celebration of industrial and technological 'progress' which occasioned the Westways Urban Motorway to be built! While Cork was astute enough to

²²MALCOLM MILES, "Community Murals in Britain", *Art for Public Places*, Winchester School of Art Press, Winchester, 1989, p72.

²³BINNINGTON, "A Genuine Social Function for Artists: A Dream or a Reality", p55. It is very likely that members of Heatwave, the British wing of the Situationist International carried this out, in the late 1960s. See Chapter 14 Decline of the English Avant-Garde.

²⁴ibid.

²⁵CORK, "The Royal Oak Murals", *Art Monthly*, No. 15, 1978, p 11.

speculate that *The Construction Workers* might be busy producing yet another block of stuffy offices, (keeping Binnington in subject matter for future mural commissions?), he simultaneously spoke enthusiastically of the “dignity of physical labour”.²⁶ This begs the question, if this was a living, heroic, praiseworthy culture, why did it need to be *re-presented* and legitimised as such by aesthetes such as Rochfort? In what sense was it represented at all? As Cork rightly asked: where were the bitter disputes that perpetually arise in the construction industry between skilled and unskilled labourers, site managers and quantity surveyors, architectural technicians and architects, etc.? Where were all the bored, injured, negligent, and poorly paid workers? Most importantly, where was there any engagement with the momentous industrial disputes that plagued the British economy in the late 1970s, and directly brought about the victory of the Conservative Party in 1979? Working-class cultures had been dying since the 1950s, the Royal Oak murals were expensive gravestones on which the deceased’s name was wrongly inscribed.²⁷

Such a critique, nonetheless, fails to investigate the attraction of mural painting in the late 1970s. It would seem that this lay mainly in an assumption that had remained largely unquestioned since the late 1960s. As Conrad Atkinson, who had developed an interest in Muralism in the 1970s, pointed out:

There is no medium which is intrinsically more democratic than any other, and there were a lot of mistaken ideas in the 70s about the dematerialization of art, about whether it was more democratic to make films or do performances or take photographs than to paint. Similarly, it’s wrong to assume that because one painting hangs on the inside of wall and another is presented externally as a mural, that one is more democratic, more progressive or more socialist than the other. Yet when I made the banners there were artists who said they felt it was an ideal way for a socialist artist to work. A banner is not necessarily a progressive thing just because it’s accessible to working people.²⁸

The basic anomaly of Cork’s defence of Muralism, then, could be said to have arisen from his privileging of traditional art media (painting) and representational systems (cubo-futurism) since these were somehow thought to be more ‘accessible’. These media and systems were in stark disparity to his late conceptualist predilections. In order to lend polemical support to the newest wave, Cork was conveniently ‘overlooking’ the photoconceptualist view that everyone

²⁶ibid.

²⁷“One wonders whether the community street life to which Mr. Cork refers isn’t largely a myth. British social life has always been very much a withdrawn, enclosed affair - this is particularly so in Scotland - and again one can find climatic reasons for this.” RICHARD CALVOCORESSI, “Reply to Richard Cork”, *Art Monthly*, Number 19, September 1978, p25-26.

²⁸CONRAD ATKINSON, “People’s Imagery: Trade Union Banners 1976”, in CAROLINE TISDALL & SANDY NAIRNE eds. *Conrad Atkinson: Picturing the System*, Pluto Press / ICA, 25th Nov-23rd December 1981, p19.

must learn to read artworks notwithstanding what medium they are in, and that this necessitates readers will have differing levels of competency in translating each medium.²⁹ As Cork would have been well aware, this relative competency does not produce differing qualitative experiences in relation to particular media, but to particular artworks within that media. Since the kinds of artworks that facilitate greater scope for their readers do not necessarily come in one particular medium, we can have no rules as to what form 'accessible' and 'difficult' art should take. Furthermore, in presenting a simplistic argument in defence of traditional practices, Cork neglected the desirability of the higher critical competency required to decode high art.³⁰ In overlooking *The Uses of Literacy*, Cork was almost mimicking the Conservative's favoured model of consumption aesthetic. Faure Walker clearly diagnosed the contradictions in Cork's argument:

...though there's a lot of effort involved in both communicating the depth and range of feeling opened up in the modern movement, and a lot of patience required in understanding, let alone trying to create things in that spirit, I feel it's the better option. The problem is how to push that range of content to its limits, not to narrow it down to that claustrophobic scale where imagery is instantly 'accessible' and everything's illustrative - as Leger said, it's insulting to the proletariat to suggest they are incapable of seeing the new forms and images modernism has liberated.³¹

As Faure Walker suggests, Cork and the mural movement in general were perpetrating some dangerous myths about the nature of modern art. In patronising his imagined audience by suggesting that high art would forever remain beyond their intellectual grasp, he was promulgating the very belief traditionally ascribed to his elitist adversaries, a belief designed precisely to seal off people's access to power. Such was the charge made against Cork and the Public Art Workshop by rival abstract muralist David Rodway in the pages of *Art Monthly*: "Their stylistic anachronism, at the same time that it leaves their perception, imagination and relevance in the world today in doubt, seems only likely to reinforce the limitations of the lay public."³² This might even lead us to conclude that Cork's intervention was in fact a

²⁹ I outline some of these ideas in the following chapter.

³⁰ This again suggests a change of heart. In 1974 Cork wrote, "The decision to defy [...] hegemony does not necessarily imply an attitude of rejection or hostility towards those who continue to uphold it. Rather it does signify a willingness to experiment with alternatives, in the conviction that one of art's principal merits is its capacity for renewal, even if the language in which fresh alternatives are framed appears at the outset to flout the intrinsic character of art itself." CORK, "Introduction", *Beyond Painting & Sculpture: Works bought for the Arts Council by Richard Cork*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Exhibition Catalogue, 1974, p4.

³¹ JAMES FAURE WALKER, "Why Not Popular", *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p21.

³² DAVID RODWAY, "Muralism", *Art Monthly*, Number 16, 1978, p21.

Conservative tactic given that it encouraged the view that visual art should be a conventional and *restricted* 'language'.³³ What was omitted from Cork's consumption aesthetics was the fact that new political and cultural structures breed new visual forms. These new forms may be of interest in that they allow one power structure to be replaced by another on entirely different terms, while maintaining the possibility of communication. The denial of *any* legitimacy to modernism as such a form effectively encouraged the ascendance of the high cultural conservatism of Peter Fuller, in turn promoting the resurgent neo-classicism favoured by Roger Scruton and Prince Charles. Of this Faure Walker was prophetic:

...talking about the 'crisis' and moving into the limelight edges out to the periphery questions dealing with the actual works being done, and keeps the dialogue in the area where the critic has the initiative: published words.³⁴

Although there were severe flaws in Cork's position, we should nonetheless be willing to praise his attempt to particularise the arguments of the British artworld. Due to Cork, the implicit assumptions underlying the "objective standards" of the Arts Council and many a mainstream curator were forced into the political domain. Cork was thus partly responsible for ending the consensual drift of the visual arts in Britain. While some of the work chosen by Cork represented another form of consensus, the practical, as opposed to intellectual, interest in cultural specificity spawned by the crisis talks eventually took some interesting paths, "providing identity, purpose and destiny", and, most importantly, the promise of "redemption after the fall of modernism."³⁵

We need to make up a critical tradition, critical of the apparatus of art practice, critical of the structures that preserve certain definitions of art and exclude others, and critical - on a level of what is actually made or done - of the dominant ideology which constructs these definitions, maintains these practices. Any attempt to say that we are going to bypass them, and get to a public by doing a community mural, may well in a particular instance be highly commendable. But it fails to get anywhere near the depth and extent of the problem of art as a special kind of repository of privileged values.³⁶

³³"What can be considered dogma, thought, is that the new art must exist outside the periphery of what art used to be. Yet nobody knows the languages (multi-form) in the new culture-to-be. Our most impressive words and concepts betray us by referring to the previously existent, not even to the present." KEVIN O'SHEA, "Book Review: Towards Another Picture", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, Volume 19, 1979, p188.

³⁴FAURE WALKER, "Why Not Popular", p117.

³⁵ FAURE WALKER, "The Claims of Social Art and Other Perplexities", *Artscribe*, 12, June 1978, p19.

³⁶ GRISELDA POLLOCK, "The Crisis in Professionalism", *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p84.

CHAPTER 5

Photoconceptualism

The politically left photographer wants to help correct society's false picture of its actual conditions of existence, to raise such questions as: Why this practice? What does it mean? What interests does it serve? Such a photographer wants to help people become conscious of the forces which shape their day-to-day lives; to realise that the social order is not a *natural order*, and thus beyond all change, but is made by people and can be changed by them.¹

In spite of their criticism of the traditional structures of the art world, conceptual artists were remarkably successful in manipulating them to their advantage. A mere three years after the term had acquired any currency it was being promoted by an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery and at a parallel *Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain* at the short-lived Gallery House. The Arts Council followed up *The New Art* at the Hayward in 1972 with a touring exhibition, *Beyond Painting and Sculpture* in 1974, and *Art as Thought Process* in 1975. [...] Thus any idea that conceptual artists had somehow dismantled the bourgeois conventions of art as an ideological representation and reproduction was contradicted by that fact that they were entirely dependent on bourgeois institutions of patronage, especially the state-subsidised gallery.²

Robert Hewison here correctly cites the oft reiterated view that Conceptualism was ultimately institutional-friendly. As we have seen, it was precisely this argument which was used by Cork and his group of artists to support their rejection of modernist systematic practices. Significantly, the notion was not that conceptualism wasn't discordant enough, but that it was impenetrable. As has been demonstrated, such beliefs were being mooted since the early 1970s. The idea of an 'art crisis', then, was specific to Cork's experience as a critic working in mainstream journalism and within the state art administration system. The pressures of the 1976 art scandals fuelled his need to forge some connection between art and 'real people', and as such must be read in light of this. When we come to study the work of other postconceptualists favoured by Cork and his fellow Art Panel members, however, it becomes clear that they were drawing on very different set of priorities and debates.

From around 1973, a number of erstwhile conceptualists began to explore captioning and context with regards to photography. This was not a new line of visual enquiry. Captioning had previously been explored by Berlin Dadaists who produced politicised photomontage and by Situationists with their detourned comic strips and subtitled pornography. Photoconceptualism in the early 1970s, then, was loosely informed by practices that had been excluded from the dominant modernist discourse on the history of twentieth-

¹ VICTOR BURGIN "Art, Common Sense and Photography", *Camera*, No. 3, 1975.

² ROBERT HEWISON, "The Arts in Hard Times", *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75*, Methuen, London, 1986, p242-243.

century art. The return of the image, albeit in a scripto-visual format, revealed a great need to escape the game playing of the modernist cognoscenti. However, unlike Conrad Atkinson and the mural movement, photoconceptualists were *extending* the linguistic-turn of analytical conceptualism, bringing its findings to bear on visual culture as a 'whole way of life'. The literary remained primary. This made photoconceptualism another move in the uneasy death of modernism.³

One thing conceptual art has done, apart from to underline the central importance of theory, is to make the photograph an important tool of practice. The consequence of such moves has been to further render the categorical distinction between art and photography ill founded and irrelevant.⁴

For photoconceptualists of the mid-1970s, Cork's support of Atkinson and the mural movement was a clear example of the representation of politics, taking a didactic, propagandistic approach to the problem of art and social purpose. For former analytical conceptualists, interested in the uses and abuses of language, this was seen as an authoritarian stance. In opposition, they advocated the politics of representation, analysing and deconstructing the subjective positions from which we experience material reality with a view to giving people the tools with which to alter dominant ideologies. In a series of works produced in 1974 entitled *Elemental Conditioning*, the performance artist John Hilliard experimented with the various effects simple changes in captioning and cropping could have on the meaning of identical photographs. Rejecting the modernist insistence on the purity of the aesthetic signifier, Hilliard turned the mechanics of photography towards contextual considerations. In *Cause of Death?*, for example, the use of a corpse covered by a sheet constitutes a dramatic subject matter in comparison with conceptualist austerity, a psychic reality which might register the subjective and emotional within the viewer. The death,

³ "In the wake of Minimal and Conceptual Art, views on the status of painting have tended towards one or other of two contrasting positions. According to the first, identifiable with some forms of 'Semio' or 'Semiological Art', painting is now an irredeemably unmodern cultural medium. As with other surviving crafts, its practice demands the exercise of outmoded and redundant technologies. Furthermore it is time-consuming, specialised and individualistic. It follows that its products are expensive luxuries, bound to a certain system of distribution and exchange and thus implicated in an inequitable and indefensible economic system. From the point of view of the constituency of the oppressed and the marginalized, its meanings are forms of mystification. The conjunction of photography and text, on the other hand, is a modern medium - indeed, if might be argued, it is *the* modern medium. Because it is potentially distributable through the same channels as advertising and propaganda, the work of the Conceptual-Artist-as-photographer can be critically engaged, as the work of the painter cannot, with the forces of exploitation and mystification in society. The artist thus qualified is in a position to intervene in ideology at the point of its generation, in the 'gap' between the world and pictures: A job of the artist which no one else does is to dismantle existing communication codes and to recombine some of their elements into structures which can be used to generate new pictures of the world." CHARLES HARRISON, "On 'A Portrait of V. I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock *Essays on Art & Language*", Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p136-137.

⁴ BURGIN, "Photographic Practice and Art Theory", *Studio International*, Photography Edition, July/August 1975, p39.

however, is presented clinically, as documentation of an event or process that demands post-mortem analysis, carried out by a combination of editing and captioning. The upwards, downwards and sideways axes are anchored to an 'elemental' regard for earth, fire, air and water, each of which could have been the agent of the body's death. We are therefore simultaneously asked to include our own (hitherto repressed) emotions in our response, while reflecting on the conditions and consequences of our varying reactions.

Like Hilliard, Victor Burgin had grown tired of the modernist "perpetual revolution syndrome", that he had been exposed to as a student at the RCA (1962-65) and Yale (1965-67) where he studied under Robert Morris and Donald Judd.⁵ Seeing art as a form of labour, his early practice was represented in books such as *Work and Commentary*. In 1971 he began to combine visual images with texts in what he would later term a scripto-visual discourse.⁶ During this period, Burgin's growing list of theoretical commitments forced him to avoid, as far as possible, an account of art practice based around single object categories. He later wrote that there was

*another story of art, a history of representations... For me, and some other erstwhile conceptualists, conceptual art opened up onto that other history, a history which opens onto history. Art practice was no longer to be defined as an artisanal activity, a process of crafting fine objects within a given medium, it was rather to be seen as a set of operations performed in a field of signifying practices, perhaps centred on a medium but certainly not bounded by it.*⁷

Like many academics in the 1970s, the rhetorical schema of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralist linguistics enchanted Burgin, leading him "to oppose that pervasive and

⁵ BURGIN in TONY GODFREY, "Sex, Text, Politics: An Interview with Victor Burgin", *Block*, No.7, 1982, p3. Judd and Morris' influence on Burgin can be determined in his essay "Situational Aesthetics", *Studio International*, October 1969.

⁶ Burgin has characterised his practice as being in direct opposition to the return to painting initiated by Ron Kitaj in 1976: "It seems clear to me that, apart from Cubism's moment of brilliance, like a star that burns most brightly in the moment it extinguishes itself, painting has been in steady semiotic decline since the rise of photographic technologies." BURGIN, "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Post-modernisms", 1965-72 *When Attitudes Became Form*, Kettles Yard Gallery, Cambridge University, 1984. Republished in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, Humanities Press International, Inc. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1986, p36. Like much of his theoretical work, this arbitrary diatribe verges on the preposterous - testifying to Burgin's wilful ignorance of the development of modern painting. Painting clearly had not been in "semiotic decline". On the contrary, since the advent of Cubism, painting seen a notable increase in terms of volume and semiotic variants. By directly associating the "decline" of painting with the "rise" of photography, Burgin negated the meanings constructed in and around the practises of painting. He implicitly denied painting's conventions and its power to communicate socially, assuming that its commodity status must render it mute and incomprehensible. Were this the case, he would render his own art production worthless.

⁷ BURGIN, *ibid.*, Republished p39.

dominating idealism in which ‘visual art’ is held to transcend language and history.”⁸ While this had been a primary concern of Burgin’s practice throughout the 1960s, the English publication of Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation” in 1971 sounded a death knoll to his overtly conceptualist aesthetic. For Burgin, ‘representation’ quickly became *the* site of ideological struggle.

Given the enormous academic growth of Marxist and Feminist theory during the 1970s, Burgin’s interests might seem unremarkable, even banal. Burgin’s theoretical position has to be examined against the Marxist debates of this era if the intricacies and significance of his practice are to be properly understood and evaluated. It is therefore informative to compare Burgin’s analytical description of art as a system of “signifying practices”, with T.J. Clark’s historiographic concept of “notions of signification”. In Clark’s art historical work of the early 1970s, a neo-semiotic form of analysis was part of an attempt to reconstruct a political reading of art history in the wake of post-structuralist theory and the scholarship associated with Althusser, Jaques Lacan and Michael Foucault, scholars who were to be the formative influence on Burgin’s theoretical and practical work in the mid-1970s.⁹ While there are significant differences between them, such theorists were seen to share similarly pragmatic theories of power and knowledge, each postulating that people are ‘written into’ subject positions already constructed for them in cultural discourse. In the eyes of post-structuralists and post-Althusserian Marxists, cultures are seen to maintain themselves somehow by self-regulation. For historical materialists such as Clark, the weakness of such a position lay precisely in the absence of theory of human agency, in the failure to provide a concrete basis for an effective oppositional political movement. This formed the basis for Clark’s infamous attack on Feminist and deconstructive forms of art history: “We need *facts* - about patronage, about art dealing, about the status of the artist, the structure of artistic production...”¹⁰

By 1973, Marxists such as Clark had come to the conclusion that Barthesian post-structuralists, in reducing meaning to free-play, were particularly guilty of collaborating with the operations of panoptic power. What was at stake in the elision of the signified was access to power itself. This position was not held unthinkingly, nor did it constitute a conservative defence of ‘vulgar’ Marxism in the mould of Berger and Fuller. Underlying Clark’s historiographic project was the notion that if discourse did mediate reality, as post-

⁸ BURGIN, *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, London, 1976, p2.

⁹ In 1973 T.J. Clark published two influential studies of French nineteenth-century painting, *The Absolute Bourgeois* and *The Image of the People*, both which analysed the relationship between class struggle and art. This coincided with the French publication of Nicos Hadjinicolaou’s *Art History and Class Struggle* (English translation 1977). The following year, Clark published a call to arms in the Times Literary Supplement, “The Conditions of Artistic Creation”, for a restructured art history drawing on Althusserian Marxism, semiotics and a close attention to material and ideological factors.

¹⁰ TIMOTHY.J. CLARK, “The Conditions of Artistic Creation”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th May 1974.

structuralists claimed with monotonous frequency, then the meanings it assigned may still be challenged.

[The artwork] may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt those structures.¹¹

[The artwork] takes a certain set of technical procedures and traditional forms, and makes them the tools with which to alter ideology - to transcribe it, to represent it.¹²

By concentrating on the complex social construction of individual artist's actions and intentions, Clark's historiographic method powerfully refuted the notion that culture might be hermeticised into a self-sustaining sign system. The emphasis was on the artist as a manipulator rather than a bearer of signifying practices.

In Burgin's post-Althusserian schema, however, the artist was denied access to material struggle:

The text is not seen as a passage to the presence of the author, but rather as a place of work, a structured space within which the reader deploys what codes he has in order to make sense. [...] The prime locus of meaning is neither 'author' nor signifier but the subject.¹³ [...] The author is no more the producer of texts than he or she is the product of texts whose prior formations determine the spaces within which his or her 'own' text may be inscribed.¹⁴

Burgin, therefore, makes an attempt to merge Clark's uncompromising materialism with post-structuralist reader theory, privileging the viewer over the artist, while retaining the Marxist concept of agency. The theoretical implications of this are numerous. Firstly, when used as a guide to reading production, Burgin's definition of art as a "set of operations performed in a *field of signifying practices*" deprives his work of any communicative capacity since it offers audiences no principle of demarcation:

In that the substances of their signifiers extensively coincide, an initially *mechanistic* materialism allows the otherwise distinct practices institutionalised as 'advertising', 'conceptual art' and 'photography' to be treated in parallel.¹⁵

¹¹ CLARK, "On the Social History of Art", *Image of the People*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1973, p13.

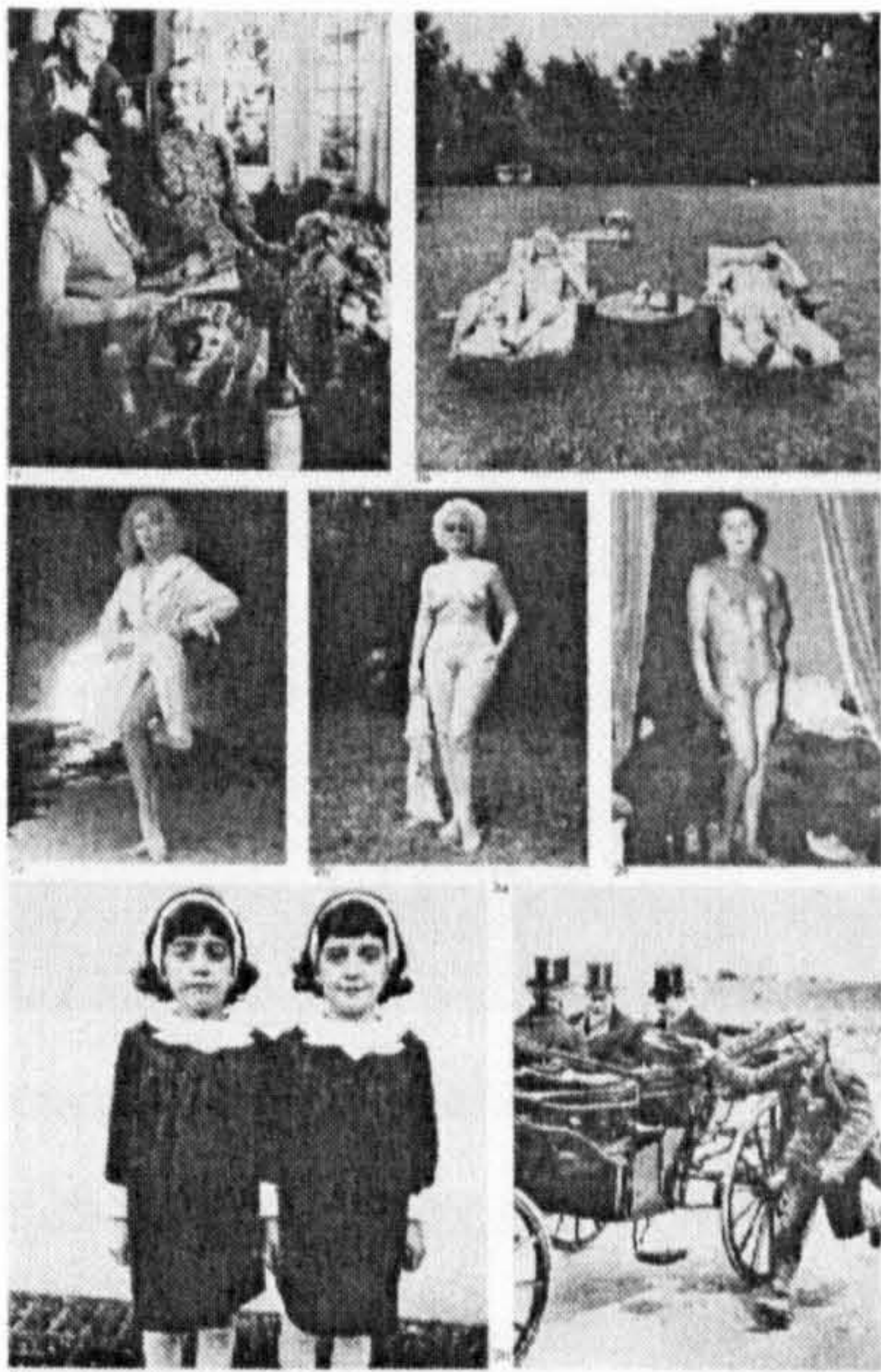
¹² CLARK, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation".

¹³ BURGIN, "Introduction", *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, London, 1976, p2.

¹⁴ Ibid., p3.

¹⁵ Ibid., p2.

Figure 5.1 Victor Burgin, “Photographic Practice and Art Theory”, *Studio International*, Photography Edition, July/August 1975, p41.



As Burgin was well aware, *mechanistic* materialism sounds a death knoll for the concept of ‘fine art’ in the West. While his particular materialist model would seem to allow the analysis of our entire visual environment, in practice it in fact denies us even the arbitrary decision of dividing up the endless continuum of ‘signifying practices’ (culture) into units for analysis. This is not to say that such a definition of art is inaccurate, merely that it was never adequately specific to be put convincingly into practice.¹⁶ Burgin’s use of a stripped down theory of *reception* as a tool for *production* resulted in a narrowing of art to basic questions surrounding the philosophy of its reception. Having played out the institutional issues of the artworld, (that artistic value is often closely allied to the capitalist system of commodity exchange) in his Conceptualist work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Burgin increasingly sought to produce works which would force us to consider how our variously inscribed subjectivities, (shaped by the postmodern trinity of class, race and gender) might effect their interpretation.

For Burgin, then, Clark’s considerations missed the urgency of the role that the left could play in the visual arts. Before value judgements might be considered the left should

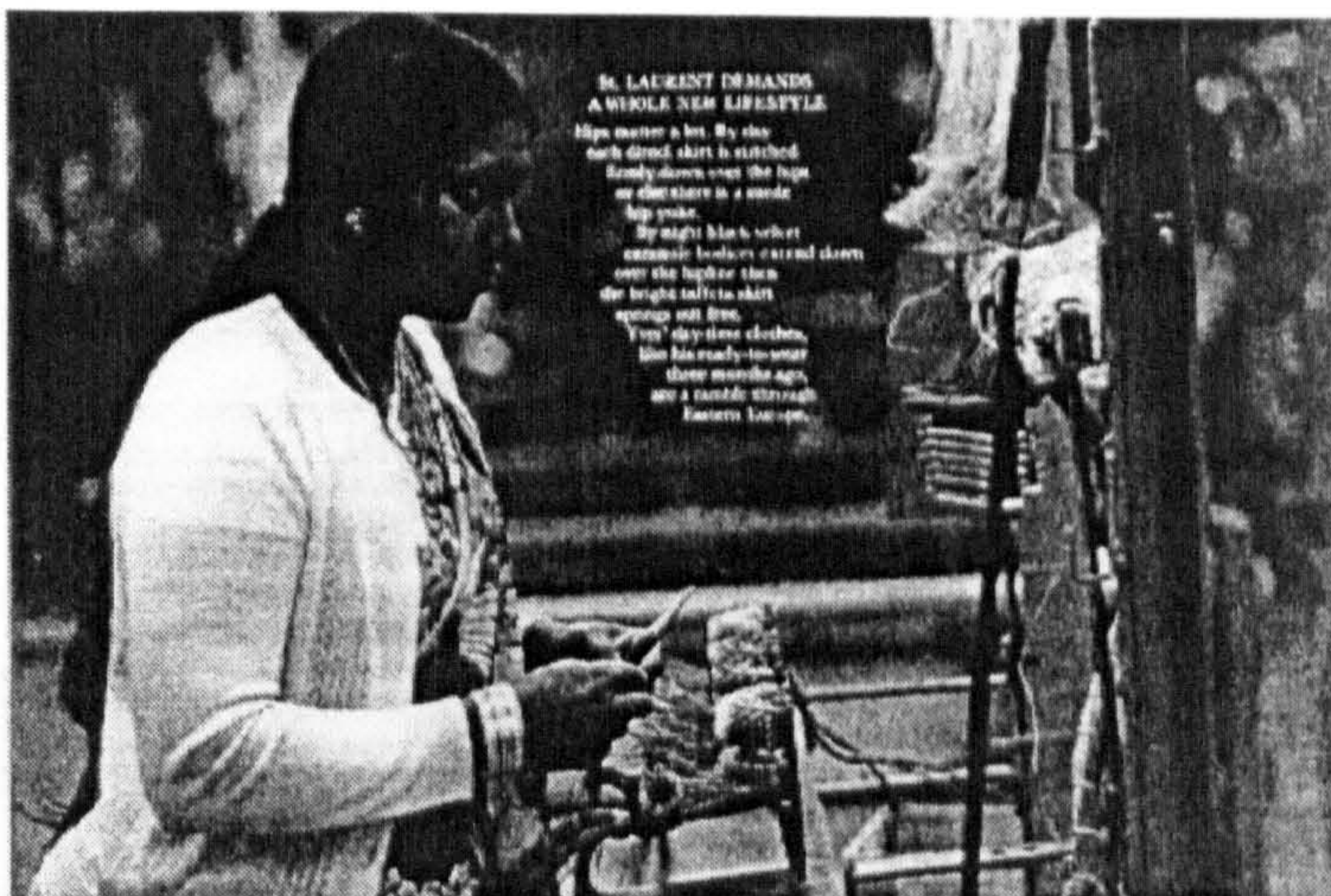
first examine those codes and practices we know *de facto* to be mass consumed. It is these codes which enshrine the dominating ideology and it is therefore these codes which are to be deconstructed: hence the interest in advertising and photography [...] in addition to constituting a practical critique of the institutionalised practices of official *Art*, left art practice becomes a matter of practical work in semiotics.¹⁷

This allowed Burgin to present a critique of advertising imagery, using its own images and conventions to undermine themselves. Between 16th January and 18th February 1976, Burgin exhibited his new series of photo-text works at the ICA New Gallery in London under the title *UK ‘76*. Here Burgin used images resembling well-known advertisements, pairing image and text together in a way that introduced a set of associations that would be easily understood by

¹⁶ While such a definition is loose enough to accommodate the production and reception of all artworks, as a useful tool it remains vague and unspecific. Cultural meta-theories are unhelpful; textuality’s infinity of meanings merely encourages us to stop discriminating between our experiences. Meta-theories merely present the appearance of hard reflection. This is an important affect of Burgin’s work which seeks to embody the specific topics of postmodernism through universalising political rhetoric.

¹⁷ BURGIN op. cit.

most viewers familiar with the visual and textual cues of the mass media. *St. Laurent Demands a Whole New Lifestyle* (1976) [Figure 5.2], for example, is a photograph taken by Burgin of an immigrant Asian woman working on an electronics assembly line. The photograph is overlaid with a promotional text for St. Laurent,



which is intended to highlight the gulf between production and consumption in the capitalist world. The ways in which this work relates to the society in which it was produced are made as transparent as possible, the overriding thematic being that, in Western culture, pleasure-images are pervaded by advertising for commodities which require an unrealistic income in order to be possessed. Given that exploiting the working classes inexpensively produces such commodities, the result is an obscene imbalance of power and profits in favour of a small minority of owners. The carefully appropriated title of *St. Laurent Demands a Whole New Lifestyle* tells viewers that adverts themselves never satiate our desires, highlighting the fact that this will only happen by purchasing the product, while pointing to the ‘new lifestyle’ demanded of producers.

The captions of such ‘lifestyle’ advertising popular in the 1970s interpellated people to *act*, to pursue and consume lifestyle ideas as though they were religious commandments. Burgin, of course, was familiar with the Althusser’s theory of interpellation, the role of ideology in securing the consent of exploited people to their own subjection to the hegemony of others. Althusser explains that all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. Interpellation is like someone calling out, ‘Hey you there’ in the street, “by this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject.”¹⁸ The subject imagines the call is directed to it and to the person calling out, unconsciously drawing the reader into the value-system, beliefs and ideology of the speaker.¹⁹ Of course, the intended impression given by such advertising was of a society in which everyone was free to act in any way they chose, to invent themselves and their culture from scratch.²⁰ This impression was

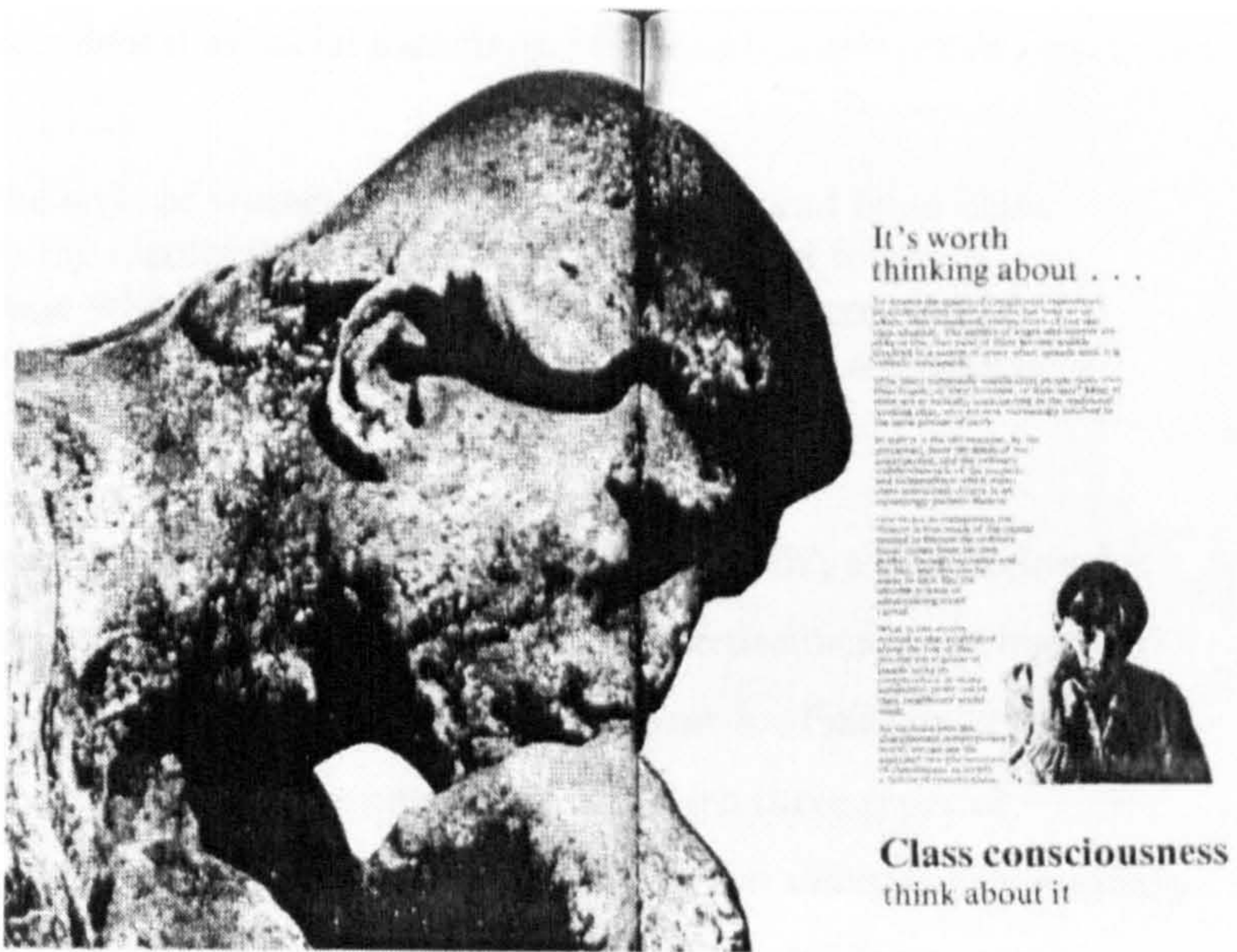
¹⁸ LOUIS ALTHUSSER, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation”, *Lenin and Philosophy*, New Left Books (Verso), 1971, p163. Representations imply that we are not seeing the real thing, but an imitation or copy, so representations do not deal directly with reality, they only give pictures of it.

¹⁹ For a critique of Althusser and Gramsci, from whom he derived his ideas, see TED BENTON, “The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism”, Macmillan, 1984.

undermined in UK’76 as Burgin rendered the exceptional systematic, while exposing the conditions of production hidden behind the mechanisms of advertising’s means of seduction.

The following month, Burgin produced a subvertisement entitled *It’s Worth Thinking About ... Class Consciousness, Think about it* for the ‘Art & Social Purpose’ issue of *Studio International*. [Figure 5.3]²¹

An enlarged Ben Day dot reproduction of Rodin’s *The Thinker* was juxtaposed with a smaller photograph of a bored woman, and the



following accompanying text, plagiarised directly from Raymond Williams:

How many supposedly middle-class people really own their houses, or their furniture, or their cars? Most of them are as radically unpropertied as the traditional working class, who are now increasingly involved in the same process of usury. ²²

Burgin’s two page spread directly followed John Stezaker’s ten page image-text piece, *The Pursuit*. Very similar concerns can be mapped out:

I’ve never felt myself affiliated with conceptual art, [...] though what I’ve said in my writings has always been antithetical to conceptual art inasmuch as I’ve tried to oppose modernism. The only support I’ve expressed for conceptual art has been in regarding it as the demise of modernism....²³

Stezaker, seeking to reverse the dematerialization of art, directed his work against the silent inaction of modernists attempt to constitute artworks as separate from ideology. Beginning

²⁰ “The ordinary salary-earner, thinking of himself as middle class because of the differences between himself and wage earners [...], fails to notice this real class beyond him, by whom he is factually and continually exploited.” RAYMOND WILLIAMS quoted in BURGIN, “Why Photography: Edited transcript of a lecture given at Reading University, Fine Art Department, 4th November 1975.” *Arte Inglese Oggi* 1970-76, Milan, Palazzo Reale, 1976, p363.

²¹BURGIN in RICHARD CORK, (ed.), *Studio International*, No. 191, March/April 1976, p146-147.

²² Excerpt. This is from the same passage of Williams quoted in BURGIN, “Why Photography”, p363.

²³ JOHN STEZAKER quoted in PETER SMITH, “Conversation with John Stezaker”, *Studio International*, (Photography Issue), May/June 1975, p130.

with an abstract theory as to what kind of art-object might be possible, Stezaker attempted to produce works that would not be self-referential in a conceptualist fashion. By attempting to overcome the avant-garde distaste for popular ideology and social determination, he “hoped to pursue the a-contextual or transcendental as social meanings.”²⁴

My treatment of stories in the style of women’s magazine romances and from news reportage are only neutral to the ideological content of these rhetorical forms in constituting a different rhetoric which *uses* rather than promotes the ideological content of ready-made rhetorical forms. In other words I’m using it for alternative ideological ends.²⁵

In *The Pursuit* Stezaker reproduced a number of advertisements: ‘Freedom’, a promotion for Spain showing a figure swimming in an open blue sea; a PanAm advertisement showing a girl walking by a Panamanian beach; and ‘You are free’, an advertisement for Fiat depicting a car driving through a field. Stezaker accompanied the advertisements with three types of discourse. The first was a conversation concerning freedom between two unnamed individuals. The interviewer asks probing Marxist questions, while the interviewee defends bourgeois notions of freedom and responsibility. The transcription of this interview was subtended on each page by passages quoted from John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, both advocates of utilitarianism. Finally, the entire project was accompanied by Stezaker’s notes, which were

in analogy with the dialogue of the work or this more specific context concerning the artist’s pursuit of social independence (and his social dependence on the concept of the ‘free floating intellectual’) which similarly conceals and perpetuates the economic basis of bourgeois striving, to which the work is addressed. The conspiratorial mutual alienation of the precepts of intellectual rationalism and bourgeois escapism represent a superstructural device (contradiction) for maintaining the movement of capital. Social transcendence, the assertion of avant-garde freedom is expressed as a cultural negation of bourgeois conformity in the alienated individual (Romanticism). The pursuit of artistic freedom inevitably ends by opposing its own tradition or the historical ‘socialisation’ of the individual idiosyncratic style and must shift its emphasis from a belief in the authenticity of individual to a belief in the authenticity of internal relations (of art). The attempt to free the artwork of its external ties means a change of attention from what is said to the manner of saying.²⁶

As with Burgin’s work, then, the emphasis was on deconstructing advertisements as examples of false-consciousness, to “correct society’s false picture of its actual conditions of existence”:²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ STEZAKER, “Notes: The Pursuit”, *Studio International*, No. 191, March/April 1976, p135-145.

²⁷ BURGIN “Art, Common Sense and Photography”.

The message is ideological not simply because it is wrong in what it says - simply to be mistaken is not necessarily to be in a state of false-consciousness - it is ideological because it misrepresents the actual material condition of the world *in the service of vested interests*.²⁸

The ways in which such works related to the intellectual preoccupations of the Left, then, were fairly obvious, and not particularly new. Such works seemed to visually re-enacted John Berger's juxtapositions of advertising in *Ways of Seeing*:

It is this which makes it possible to understand why publicity remains credible. The gap between what publicity actually offers and the future it promises, corresponds with the gap between what the spectator-buyer feels himself to be and what he would like to be. The two gaps become one; and instead of the single gap being bridged by action or lived experience, it is filled with glamorous daydreams. This process is often reinforced by working conditions. The interminable present of meaningless working hours is balanced by an imaginary future in which imaginary activity replaces the activity of the moment. In his or her daydreams the passive worker becomes the active consumer. The working self envies the consuming self.²⁹

The banal suggestions and bullying imperatives of lifestyle marketing interpellated consumers to adopt a multitude of contrary imperatives resulting in an overload of options for the consuming self. The pressure of constantly having to build support systems and philosophies leads to neurosis, and therefore to the working self's lack of concerted political action. The abstract space of the market had destroyed the autonomy of the 'real', in order to reproduce it as pleasurable spectacle. It is for this reason that both Stezaker and Burgin's photo works identified pleasure in the imaginary enjoyment of something as taking place in an imaginary time and place. However, given that such photoworks were, in one sense, forms of dreamscape, they remain striking in their impersonal, factual appearance. For Marxist's such as Berger and Althusser, ideology emphasised 'imaginary relationships of individuals', as opposed to structurally and materially defined circumstances.

Were Burgin and Stezaker both faithful to the Marxist view that imaginary pleasure is merely a substitute for and an evasion of the life that might really exist during the time of the illusion? Stezaker's notes for *The Pursuit*, lying just outside the border of the 'work', situated the project within such an ideological framework. Its clearly demarcated hierarchies of discourse (Marxism > Utilitarianism > Conversation = Text > Image), signalled that there was a 'preferred' way to read the work, and this involved retaining the view that Marxism was a metalanguage, corroborating Althusser's claims that Marxism, structuralist or otherwise, lay outside ideology. Although *UK '76* and *Class Consciousness...* saw Burgin juxtapose (pictorial)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ JOHN BERGER, "Chapter 7", *Ways of Seeing*, BBC, 1972, p148-149.

'illusions' with materialist (literary) 'facts', as he had in his earlier work, both works signalled something of a break with his earlier scripto-visual practice.³⁰ Rather than 'comment on the commentary', as Stezaker continued to do, Burgin left the juxtapositions freer for the viewer to interpret. This was the result of Burgin's reading of Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic 1975 *Screen* paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema",³¹ which conceived ideology as a space to which there is neither outside nor end; a space the subject negotiates through transitions that are predominately unconscious. While an Althusserian hierarchy remained Burgin's practice, there were possibilities that the viewer could read his work in other ways, for example, as undermining the epistemological legitimacy of both discourses, capitalist and Marxist.

Despite these apparent differences, Burgin and Stezaker remained similar in that both continued to invalidate the humanist implications of being a *producer* of culture. It was for this reason that they chose simply to intervene in already prevalent modes of iconicity, altering the explicit meanings that promotional images were initially intended to communicate, dismantling codes and recombining them in such a way as to produce different, often contradictory, pictures of the world. Photoconceptualist pictures thus arose through juxtaposition and incongruity rather than through composed humanistic 'inspiration'. However, despite their apparent opposition to humanistic notions of art as apolitical self-discovery, much of this work continued to be exhibited within the confines of the art gallery network. Burgin exhibited in "spacious white rooms of a classic avant-garde dealer's showplace, a converted warehouse in an area of Covent Garden where creeping gentrification will soon create a trendy alternative to the Bond Street galleries."³² While Burgin and Stezaker continued the conceptualist use of non-crafted materials such as reproducible photographs, they never produced affordable multiples of his work that could be acquired by a

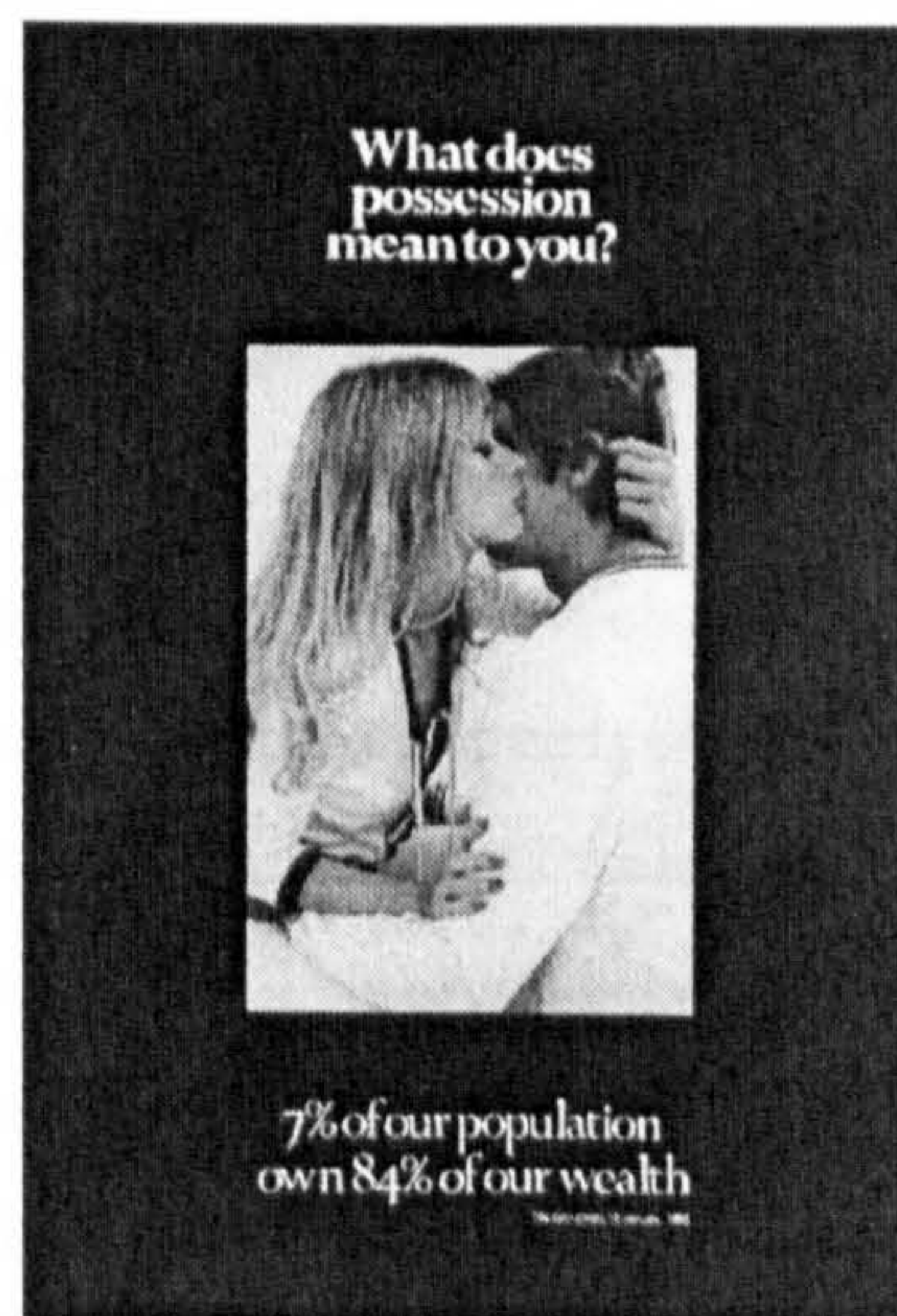
³⁰ "...it's not enough simply to oppose one discourse with another, antithetical, discourse. One has to *know* the discourse that is being opposed in order to assimilate it, transform it within the discourse of "higher logical type". BURGIN, "Why Photography", p365. "*Lei Feng* (1973-74) [a communist soldier] is a work which Burgin showed at the Lisson Gallery in 1974. It is distinguishable from the more recent work in that it has semiotic guidelines as a complementary text to the piece. The work consists of nine large posters, each of which has the repeated image of Harvey's Bristol Cream ad ('another breadwinner in the family deserves a toast'). The image relies upon many ideological and psychological cues. It is the picture of an apparently successful fashion model enjoying the micro-collective solace of the family, displaying herself on the cover of *Vogue*. This is contrasted with the prosaic sentiments expressed in the form of a Maoist parable, in which the heroism of dying in a coal mine disaster (for the good of society) is equated with dying in battle." PETER SMITH, "Victor Burgin: ICA New Gallery, 16th January - 18th February", *Studio International*, No. 191, March/April 1976, p202-203.

³¹ LAURA MULVEY, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, Vol. 16, No.3, 1975.

³² CORK, "The Gap Between Photographer and Artist", *Evening Standard*, November 4th, 1976 reprinted in *The Social Role of Art*, Gordon Fraser, London 1979, p74.

non-artworld audience.³³ Given that his work was “dedicated to supporting an ideology at total variance with the way his art is sold”,³⁴ Burgin risked being dismissed as a hypocritical preacher to the converted, much as Conrad Atkinson had been since the beginning of the decade.

Figure 5.4 Victor Burgin What Does Possession Mean to You?, (1976).



An opportunity to acquit himself of this charge seemed to emerge early in 1976, when Burgin was commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) to produce a poster to accompany a group exhibition of art “which is exploring basic concepts of our use of images and language as a means of communication” held at Edinburgh’s Fruitmarket Gallery 3rd-24th April.³⁵ The poster, entitled *Possession*, was seen throughout Scotland, ensuring a wide audience for Burgin’s message. However, any suggestion that Burgin might have been looking to circumvent the private gallery network was in turn circumvented that November when the exhibition selector, the art dealer Robert Self, gave Burgin a solo show at his Covent Garden gallery. The placard was quickly exposed to controversy of a different sort when Lord Balfour complained that it was political rather than artistic, a ‘crisis’ which was alleviated when the SAC disclosed that Burgin had been a member of the Arts Advisory Panel and Awards to Artists subcommittee of the Arts Council of Great Britain since 1971. Following the

³³ Unlike Stezaker, Burgin made ‘anonymous’ subvertisements for exhibition catalogues and art journals. However, Burgin never crossed over into mainstream lifestyle magazines such as *Harpers & Queen* or *Melody Maker*. See ‘Going Somewhere? Class Consciousness you’re nowhere without it!’ ROBERT BARRY, VICTOR BURGIN, HAMISH FULTON, GILBERT AND GEORGE, HANS HAACKE, JOHN HILLIARD, KOSUTH/CHARLESWORTH, DAVID TREMLETT, LAWRENCE WEINER, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 3rd - 24th April 1976; ‘It’s Worth Thinking About ... Class Consciousness, Think about it.’ *Studio International*, No. 191, March/April 1976, p146-147; “What Does Possession Mean to You?”, *Camerawork*, No.3, 1976, back cover; “Centrefold”, *ZG*, Vol.1, 1981, unpaginated; and “Centre Pages”, *BLOCK*, No.8, 1983, p34-35.

³⁴ CORK, “The Gap Between Photographer and Artist”, p74. Burgin had earlier claimed that this was the point of his work: “We are not a socialist society and the dissident artist is thus caught in an essential contradiction, that of affecting a proletarian stance in a bourgeois setting, that of thinking as a socialist while eating as a capitalist. Our society is rife with such contradictions. Who better experienced in them than our artists and intellectuals. So, we might say, a job for the socialist artist in our sort of society is to foreground these contradictions, and in so doing help society through its transition to socialism.” BURGIN, “Why Photography”, p362.

³⁵ ROBERT BREEN, “Foreword”, BARRY, BURGIN, FULTON, GILBERT AND GEORGE, HAACKE, HILLIARD, KOSUTH/CHARLESWORTH, TREMLETT, WEINER, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 3rd - 24th April 1976..

intervention of Burgin's dealer Robert Self, a new edition of the poster was commissioned without the reference to the Edinburgh exhibition.³⁶

On the 21st June 1976, 500 copies of *What Does Possession Mean to You?* were posted throughout the streets of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. According to Burgin, the new version of *Possession* used mass-media source to expose its own covert meanings, printing the photographs on a large scale similar to that of public advertising hoardings. It is significant in this case that Burgin did not take the photograph himself, but rather purloined a cardinal example of the kind of glamour photography used in advertising at the time. Given that his previous brand of semiotic deconstruction had risked becoming the means for transferring ontological value to a new socially accountable artworld context, Burgin felt it necessary to make it even more difficult to distinguish his work from advertising, thereby collapsing the distinction between art and visual culture, or object and subject texts. This would ensure that his texts purposively intervened in the operations of power, operating on the same terms as the cultural hegemony he intended to challenge, rather than servicing to the semantically converted. Hence, unlike the exposé of *UK'76*, *Possession* operated like a striptease, promising access to a product (the 'meaning' of the work) but never delivering it. This had much to do with Burgin's realisation that semiotics had "no way of accounting for the emotional force of texts" for "what is external ('objective') and what is internal ('subjective') areas in a relation of mutual affectivity."³⁷ Burgin was slowly moving away from Althusserian Marxism towards theories of sexuality, subjectivity, pleasure and photography as visual fantasy.

On the one hand, Burgin was undoubtedly continuing his practice of pairing photographs of commonplace advertisements with typeset messages that negate or parody their rhetorical language. At the same time, however, his use of a soundbite from *The Economist* made his work purposely complicitous with the fast narrative drive of advertising, with its need to sell quickly and efficiently. This ambiguous device suggests that our desire for critical knowledge is also part of a quest to purchase more and more products; our desire being to uncover and devour meaning. The 'factuality' of the written text, is therefore deemed to be as questionable as the image it accompanies. Consequently, *Possession* was most unlike *St. Laurent Demands a Whole New Lifestyle*, promising to stimulate additional cultural consumption through desire (what *else* does this poster mean?), as opposed to desire through consumption (who/what will Burgin expose next?) This subtle distinction is openly apparent in the photograph chosen by Burgin, which relates to a more direct, base form of consumption than purchasing *St. Laurent*: sexual desire, the voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze that Mulvey had identified as being crucial to visual pleasure. 'Natural' desires then are also commodified; they

³⁶ Self had close links with Michael Spens, who had become a millionaire when Pilkington Glass went public, and decided, in traditional aristocratic fashion, to use his new found wealth to become a patron of the new 'socially responsible' avant-garde of the mid-1970s, by purchasing *Studio International*.

³⁷ BURGIN, "Introduction", *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, p2.

to be inseparable parts of the network of capitalist relations. Of course, sexuality was a form of desire which advertisers habitually and wantonly exploited in the 1970s, with their routine use of masculine and feminine types. By plagiarising such images, *Possession* confirmed that the attraction of such images from the manufacturers and advertisers rationalised point of view lay in their efficiency, predictability, and calculability. Burgin's subtle manipulation of commercial signifying practices therefore suggested that consumption was not the special lifestyle event it pertained to be.

The politically 'Left' photographer wants to help correct society's false pictures of its actual conditions of existence, to raise such questions as: Why this practice? What does it mean? What interests does it serve? Such a photographer wants to help people become conscious of the forces which shape their day-to-day lives; to realise that the social order is not the natural order, and thus beyond all change, but is made by people and can be changed by them.³⁸

However, while revealing such social structures to be fallacious, Burgin's view of the means of control as a self-supporting sign system meant that he did not leave the viewer with much optimism that something could be done to *change* this system by *them*.

Given that Burgin was denying wholesale access to material struggle, does this mean that Clark's cherished "*facts* - about patronage, about art dealing, about the status of the artist, the structure of artistic production..."³⁹ are of no critical consequence to its analysis and evaluation? Following his brief experiment with extra-gallery art, Burgin began to reassert that, as an artist, he had to work within the institutions of control (universities, museums, etc.) in order to find the most effective resonance for his 'critique'. This, of course, was a convenient line of argument for Burgin, who, in addition to being a famous artist, had been a senior lecturer in the History and Theory of the Visual Arts at the School of Communication, Central London Polytechnic, since 1973. Burgin, then, was in a secure position from which to view a world (helplessly) in thrall to rigid codes of fantasy fed into their consciousness by the communications network, professedly mirroring his own 'dilemma' as a left-wing artist whose stance was being (willingly) compromised by the art market. The reality of Burgin's relative empowerment suggests that there *had* to be a detached position in his allegedly post-Althusserian scripto-visual work. Despite the subtlety of *Possession*, it remains to be seen if it was ever really possible for Burgin to create "parallel texts which operate both as a critique of their object text (even while imbricated in it) and as self-critique."⁴⁰ By making no attempt to draw conclusions beyond his own criticism of an existing text, the transference of ontological

³⁸ BURGIN, "Art, Common-sense and Photography", p2.

³⁹ CLARK, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation".

⁴⁰ BURGIN in GODFREY, "Sex, Text, Politics: An Interview with Victor Burgin", p3.

value was still left hidden as faith in the underlying principles and assumptions that would guide 'critical' readings of his photoworks, (such as that made earlier in this chapter). Setting up binary oppositions, even if only to topple them, Burgin risked perpetuating the ideologies they authenticate. Even if we were to agree that Burgin deconstructed the subject-object dichotomy, we would fail to fully consider the distribution and consumption of his work, and consequently fail to recognise the fact that his deconstructive photographic parodies restructured the art myth to substantiate critical postmodernist ideals not yet falsified themselves by deconstructive inversion. It was precisely this point which was substantiated by crisis critics in 1976. During the first issue of *Studio International* under his stewardship, Cork admitted Dave Rushton and Paul Wood to take issue with *Possession's* distribution and consumption in a satirical comic strip:

The irony's about to thicken / As we come upon: a Dealer - stricken / By lack of art deemed social, but refined / Enough to show in Newcastle ('pon Tyne). / Despite his roots in Royal cash, / Our 'Self-made' cadger sees no clash / 'Twixt Social Purport and a base / In Capital's art market place / His posters begged, he makes a start / To reclaim politics for art. / Helped by this work's collaboration / He wreaks a transubstantiation. / Of Victor's conscience, what's the price, / Now ripped off not once, but twice? / So don't believe what the posters say. / The message is: Art Rules, O.K.⁴¹

Rushton and Wood clearly saw an enormous contradiction inherent in the genesis of *Possession*, a contradiction which they see as being economic in origin (the work would never have existed without the intervention of Burgin's metropolitan dealer.)

This controversy was highlighted in the same issue of *Studio International* which contained an edited transcript of a series of responses to the posters made by members of the public, and recorded by Radio Newcastle on the 7th of July.⁴² As would later be the case with the Royal Oak Murals, the interviewees were largely unaware of the messages that Burgin was trying to convey, and clearly feared that voicing their opinion would lead to embarrassment. In producing artworks in which "interlocking levels of practice [i.e. high and low art] coexist in the same text"⁴³ Burgin had *intended* to cater to the widest interpretative community possible,

⁴¹ DAVE RUSHTON and PAUL WOOD, "Hovels and Palaces: 1", *Studio International*, September/October 1976, p133.

⁴² EIRLYS TYNAN, "Victor Burgin's 'Possession'", *Studio International*, 193, September/October 1976, p225-226.

⁴³ BURGIN, *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, p3. Later Burgin wrote "the word 'photography' names a medium, whereas the word 'art' names a *value* which it implicitly confers on the mediums of painting and sculpture. It is in the name of this value that 'art history' in this country has defended its frontiers against post-structuralism's barbarian hordes. The threat of 'theory' is presently being controlled by a policy of assimilation by selective immigration." BURGIN, "Introduction: Something About Photography Theory", A.L. REES & F. BORZELLO, (eds.) *The New Art History*, Camden Press, London, 1986, p42. Burgin is correct to claim that 'art' remains an evaluative term,

producing a pluralistic mode of leftist production which would avoid the pitfalls of populism. What he *achieved*, nonetheless was a practical challenge to the New Art History which appeared to forego its hierarchy of metalanguages. Despite itself, the New Art History attempted to put the critic at a confrontational distance from the world, which would then be seized to be known. It therefore indulged in a kind of 'false transcendence'. Although they made no effort to appear omniscient, and insisted on the illusory nature of art, Clark and his followers were being accused of standing outside from the frame of events in their texts thereby invoking metaphysical notions of homogeneous 'reality' as the common referent to serve as an index of truth.⁴⁴

The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are *texts* inscribed in terms of what we may call 'photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself [...] photographic imagery is typically *laconic*.⁴⁵

While this aspect of Burgin's practical work was stimulating, as a theoretical assumption it paradoxically denied the legitimacy of his radical stance. As a corollary of his belief in the anthropological construction of culture, Burgin implied that there was a content to experience separable from its form. Were this entirely true, Burgin's photography would belong to the same reality as other things. Clearly the meaning of Burgin's work is socially constructed, but the role of his images *as rhetorical statements* about culture necessitates the tacit acknowledgement of their formal hierarchy from their source materials.⁴⁶ Were this hierarchical distinction formed purely on an institutional basis, as Burgin implied, viewers of his work would be returned empty handed to the barren terrain of purposeless fact, and so to a futile inertia which is altogether antithetical to the moral and political imperatives of his work.⁴⁷ As Clark put it:

despite the best efforts of Institutional theorist to render it categorical. Both Clark and A&L wished to retain 'art' as an evaluative term, lest they lapse into relativism.

⁴⁴"...history is still conceived as at once 'over' (completed) and 'over there' (distanced): art historical research is still seen as working on the past in much the same way as certain chemicals work on a latent photographic image, an image which simply needs to be adequately developed in order to emerge in all its immutable detail." BURGIN, "Introduction: Something About Photography Theory", p42.

⁴⁵ BURGIN, "Looking at Photographs", *Screen Education*, Autumn 1977.

⁴⁶ By "formal hierarchy" I do not mean a 'formalist' distinction based on colour, composition etc.. but a distinction rooted in the manner in which Burgin's photo-works present their argument, in the way in which they transgress and criticise their sources through formal and textual additions and subtractions.

⁴⁷ Questions of class, race and gender were presented undigested, peculiarly and paradoxically universalised as art arguments. There was also a tendency for Burgin to make modernist assumptions regarding the *essence* of photographic practice: "manipulation is the essence of photography; *photography would not exist without it*." BURGIN "Art, Common Sense and Photography". The greatest sense of irony lies in the fact that the initiators of such an approach to artworks - Ferdinand de

It may be that we are too eager, now, to point to the illusory quality of that circling back, that closure against the 'free play of the signifier'. Illusion or not it seems to me the necessary ground on which meanings can be established and maintained: kept in being long enough, and endowed with enough coherence, for the ensuing work of dispersal and contradiction to be seen to matter - to have to matter, in the text, to work against.⁴⁸

Burgin, therefore, failed to provide a valid theoretical method of discriminating between his images and the images that they critique. His theoretical work also posed a problem in relation to his intended audience. Burgin's work in many ways continues the Modernist fascination with blocking, refusing, and deconstructing 'facile' pleasures such as identification, cleansing our gaze with any involvement or immersion in the subject-matter, in the fictional or imaginary world that makes art possible.⁴⁹ Moreover, it would seem that the 'interests' of the *hoi polloi* were patronisingly accommodated, as much as if to satisfy the naive 'dialectical' conditions of Burgin's theorising. While connoisseurs of 'High Art' might comprehend Burgin's allusions to the history of the Nude, the aesthetically disenfranchised were invited to comprehend 'less complex' relations with advertising or with their own photographic dabblings. Hence, it might be argued, despite his intention to interlock different levels of practice in the same text, Burgin only managed to serve one interpretative community, the academic cognoscenti.

Again, despite his best efforts, parallels still emerge between Burgin's practical concerns and the historiographic strategies adopted by orthodox Marxist art historians during the 1970s. For example, in Clark's historical materialist account of modern art, the degree of commitment to such political issues is inseparable from his attributes of value. In the case of Manet, for example, Clark argued that the pictorial inconsistencies that produced the effect of flatness "must have been somehow appropriate to the social forms the painter had chosen to show".⁵⁰ Clark therefore related Manet's practice to the 'flatness' of modern culture, describing his technique as a metaphorical marker for a capitalist society of illusory display, (what would become the 'society of the spectacle' that Clark actively opposed while a member of Heatwave and King Mob in the late 1960s.) What is important to note here is the manner in which Clark insisted on the primacy and value of *specific* art objects or events as tools which could 'alter ideology'. While Clark's politicised defence of value seemed abstract and

Sassure, the Russian Formalists, the New Critics etc.. - were concerned above all to produce a method of reading which would facilitate our understanding and enjoyment of the most richly-layered texts available in culture.

⁴⁸ CLARK, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865", *Screen*, Spring 1980, p30.

⁴⁹See JESSICA EVANS, "Victor Burgin's Polysemic Dreamcoat", *Art Has No History!*, Verso, 1994.

⁵⁰ CLARK, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984, p252.

theoretical, in fact it was only accommodated by way of his detailed and salient examination of formal structure.⁵¹

In Burgin's practice, however, the politicisation of value judgements remained in its theoretical state, spawning a cult of reception erotics which would reduce art to a description more trivial than spirited or philosophic. Adopting the pseudo-analytical style of poststructuralist art historians, Burgin was led to dismember experience so that it could not be reconstituted as a whole. Instead of a tangled web of specific facts and ideas, Burgin's writings confront us with categories of class, race and gender independent of all concrete experience, all psychological actuality, and all historical time, leading us towards an unhistorical dogmatism. Moreover, having reduced art theory to a number of themes, Burgin blunted the Clarkian notion of art forms being "tools with which to alter ideology", denying the viewer the kind of purposefully intense unity of experience that Clark held to be the 'motor force' of ideologically advanced art.⁵²

Unlike Clark's complex analytical method, Burgin's post-modernist distrust of the imagination tended to bind the limits of thought. Rather than ask the viewer to 'suspend their disbelief', Burgin made the seemingly revolutionary statement that "Art is not truth", yet without Picasso's irony.⁵³

I want to stress the image not as an illusion but as *text*, to be read. [...], photography as a discursive form, as a practice of representation, as a social *fact*, [...] it's not a matter of personal choice, it just happens to be a *fact*.. [...] You can choose to ignore a fact, but if you think that makes the fact any less factual then you're in a state of delusion.⁵⁴

⁵¹ "Where cultural studies have already impinged on the discourse [of art history], for example in the work associated with T.J. Clark and Griselda Pollock, it still returns to the centrality of the text, and to questions of what constitutes an adequate reading of art works. Cultural approaches, however, see the text not only as a particular moment of its circulation, a circulation whose other moments include its production, the institutions surrounding both its making and exchange, its marketing and promotion, and, crucially, its historical and contemporary reception by audiences." SEAN BUBITT, "Videography: The Helical Scan", *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture*, Macmilland, 1993, 17. While Bubitt is correct to claim that Clark and Pollock return to the text, he is wrong to suggest that they do not examine issues of production and reception, indeed they create a delicate balance between all aspects of critical analysis.

⁵² Despite the fact that Burgin also held this view of the art object, describing "the way objects transmit and transform ideology, and the ways in which photographs in their turn transform these." BURGIN, "Photographic Theory and Art Practice", *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, Robert Self, London, p5.

⁵³ "We all know Art is not truth. Art is a lie that make us realise truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and re-searched, for the way to put over lies, he would never accomplish anything. [...] Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art we express our conception of what nature is not." PABLO PICASSO, "Picasso Speaks", *The Arts*, New York, May 1923, p315-26.

⁵⁴ BURGIN in GODFREY, "Sex, Text, Politics: Interview with Victor Burgin".

Burgin is correct in his observations. That art is often ideological, or an example of ‘false consciousness’, is indisputable. We might, however, protest that to deconstruct or demystify this ‘fact’ is to miss an important difference between *ideology* in this classically Marxist sense, and the manner in which many artworks are ideological. A vast number of artist and viewers seek precisely to ignore art’s contingency, hoping to find something ‘other’ in art. Indeed, as an ideology, aesthetics initially arose as a possible means of escape from the dominant ideologies of the State and the Church. Art, in this sense, seeks to suppress its contingency. Similarly, for Burgin, “what is essential about it [ideology] is that it is contingent and that *within it the fact of its contingency is suppressed.*”⁵⁵ However, the contingency of artworks is often suppressed in an entirely different spirit, it is masked rather than disguised:

The actor on the stage expresses sadness. Is he therefore sad? Need he ever have experienced authentic sadness? No. All that is required to make him a competent actor is that he should be able competently to *represent* sadness - that he should know how to fake it.⁵⁶

This clearly relates to the dramatic theory of Brecht for whom the whole pretence of what was going on the stage was ‘real’ interfered with the effective communication between dramatist and audience. Only by recognising that actors are acting, Brecht argued, can the audience begin seriously to involve themselves in the dramatist’s *critical* presentation of reality. The ability to detect art’s mask without removing it entirely is essential to the production of this critical distance. Burgin’s literalism caused him to miss an important consideration; namely that to be “captivated” by artworks we *cannot* entirely suspend our disbelief, for we must recognise slight-of-hand if we are to conclude that artistry (artifice) is taking place:

...the artist separates mime (showing observation) from gesture (showing a cloud), but without detracting from the latter, since the body’s attitude is reflected in the face and is wholly responsible for its expression. At one moment the expression is of well-managed restraint; at another of utter triumph.⁵⁷

It is, therefore, by forcing us to appreciate their contingency without subsequently disowning their productions, that artists are able to produce the Brechtian ‘alienation effect’ after which

⁵⁵ BURGIN, “Photographic Practice and Art Theory”, *Studio International*, Photography Edition, July/August 1975, p41.

⁵⁶ HARRISON, “‘Seeing’ and ‘Describing: the Artists’ Studio”, *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p161-162.

⁵⁷See: BERTHOLD BRECHT, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting”, 1957.

Burgin strove. Burgin adds a materialist twist to this point when describing “fine art photography”, as a form of practice

concerned with the image as a source of *fascination*, a form of *captivation*, a sort of trap for the eye in which one’s sense of being is somehow condensed into the exercise of the visual faculty - what we might call the “mesmeric” school of photography.⁵⁸

Certainly photographs are ideological in Burgin’s sense in that they do not require viewers to strike up a serious relationship with something unequivocally ‘true’ or beyond the existent, but with a particular, artificial way of seeing. However, to refuse this “mesmeric” imperative is to refuse not only art (the ways in which artworks have the potential to transform the prevailing ideology), but the ability to generate and manipulate our own world. While correctly revealing our distinctions between Is and Is Not, True and False to be imaginary or unreal, Burgin fails to inform us that to absolutely refuse to identify or merge with the *objet d’art* would necessitate the destruction of our life-world. Moreover, by adopting its analytical approach to art we may destroy not only the illusionary world, but the artworld which allows us to read Burgin’s photography as a semiological critique of art. If Burgin undermines the notion that a photograph operates without the viewer’s prior assumptions, he can only do so by installing a new set of assumptions, namely his theoretical preoccupations. Terry Atkinson’s analysis of the monochrome could equally be applied to Burgin:

The discourses built for the monochrome are in a historical bind, they need to claim that they subscribe to the highest standards of critical thinking and interrogative procedure, and they do so claim, whilst at the same time admitting that an important aspect of the first is to critically think and interrogate the notions of critical thinking and interrogative procedure, which they can’t since this would undermine the structural and a priori assumptions which are critical thinking and interrogative procedure.⁵⁹

How else might we offer an account of Burgin’s work, given his claims that “conceptualism cannot be slotted into a history of style”⁶⁰? One possibility is precisely to examine Burgin’s infatuation with photography in terms of period vogue. Following in the wake of minimalism

⁵⁸ BURGIN in GODFREY, “Sex, Text, Politics: Interview with Victor Burgin”. This echoes a point made by Burgin in an earlier essay: “The characteristics of the photographic apparatus position the subject in such a way that the object photographed serves to conceal the textuality of the photograph itself - substituting passive receptivity for active (critical) *reading*.” BURGIN, “Looking at Photographs”.

⁵⁹ ATKINSON, “Mutes”, *Terry Atkinson: Mute 3 (Works After 1987)*, VestsjFllands Kustmuseum, Sorre; The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1989, p29.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p38. Burgin’s claim is weak, Conceptualism owing a great deal to the ‘pared down’ aesthetics of Late Modernism, a fact which became increasingly apparent as in the mid-1980s as this cerebral style was rejected.

and conceptualism, photography evoked similar values of honesty and integrity by way of an illusory simplicity and coolness of tone, a plain style in which images appear to limit themselves to precise and denotative meanings. This obscured the fashion in which Burgin's works demonstrated a contemptuous irreverence for veritable conviction, concern and political activity. Unlike Conrad Atkinson's work, Burgin's photo-texts predominately harnessed political debate to considerations of design. As a consequence, the possibilities of debate they offered were solely those adapted to his preordained image-text practice, disregarding data which might have been of political relevance if it did not fit comfortably within the bi-polar arrangement of his work. Burgin used photography to deflate and magnify *his* artwork's status and the values by which its status was being judged, to invite belief in his work by undercutting the assumptions which necessarily underpinned his work and the work of all other artists. A game of one-upmanship was being played. In Burgin's hands, photography became a sophisticated, neo-conceptualist manner to meddle with representation without stooping to the indecency of the New Humanism:

...everybody shared the minimalist aesthetic. It was just uncool to do anything that wasn't clean and austere. that style, [...] one shouldn't over intellectualise this. [...] ...there was an ethics in not having luxurious consumer goods, so there's a politics either implicit or explicit in it. But that was less to do with the austere style it was more to do with the materials. Bob Morris' sculpture or Donald Judd's sculpture was austere, but boy, did it sell. Judd particularly became very well off. So I chose not to do something that some rich guy could buy and put on his land or in his condo, to do something that would blow away, literally, or something that was so cheap that nobody would be seen dead with it in their penthouse apartment, that was a certain sort of ethic, if you like, a political act.⁶¹

Of course, it was relatively effortless to embrace photography as an alternative to the contaminations of modernist art's distribution network while still producing publications consisting of a 'tastefully' small number of pictures of artworks accompanied by large volumes of critical commentary. In all, this allowed a covert shifting of the agenda towards theoretically minded artists such as Burgin. For Burgin, this was particularly agreeable. In contributing practically to the growing body of academic Marxist and semiotic art historical doctrine, Burgin bestowed himself with the satisfaction of having made a substantial intellectual innovation. In an ironic sense, Marxist art history was rapidly becoming a self-support group, much like the Greenbergian Modernism it regularly denounced. Despite its professed revolutionary stance, Burgin's work fits squarely into a resolute tradition of High art in the Twentieth century, namely that connected with the pseudo-scientific investigations of cultural scholars. This is a fact that vies uncomfortably with the materialist call for historical specificity, a requirement denied in Burgin's facile tendency to universalise his position in his apparently rational rhetorical tracts.

⁶¹ BURGIN in ROBERTS ed., "Interview with Victor Burgin", *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, Camerawords, London, 1997, p92.

CHAPTER 6

Community Photography

Without a sympathetic context for women's art and vocal spokeswomen, English artists dared not risk direct depictions of such subjects as female sexuality for fear they would be mistaken for traditional pornography. This fear of being misunderstood drove many feminists away from the minefield of representation and fostered growth of a more theoretical approach. Borrowing the tools of structuralism, feminists exposed patriarchal hierarchies concealed within verbal, visual, and cinematic language. These hidden codes positioned femininity as the negative value against which masculinity establishes its cultural primacy.¹

The task of feminist art, they felt, was to peel back the layers in traditional representation and expose the roots of oppression embedded in the very same terms we use to describe ourselves. The contaminated words and pictures of everyday life were abandoned in favour of academic analyses. What we were being offered was deconstruction as art. The art often took the form of photographic or diagrammatic images captioned by academic texts, a format that was typical of much socialist art at the time. A copious theoretical literature grew up around these works reinforcing the new ascendancy of words over pictures. The traditional conflict between theory and practice was temporarily solved now that theory was practice.²

In the mid-seventies, Burgin and Stezaker were far from alone in their methods and concerns. In 1974 Jo Spence and Terry Dennett established the Photography Workshop in London as an independent education, research, publishing and resource project. "As a socialist and a feminist" claimed Spence, "it has become untenable for me to work any longer as a 'professional' photographer, having to sell my labour and my photographs in order to support myself. [...] This is because the images I produced became part of an ideology which fixed and constructed people into particular class, race and gender positions which were not always in their own interests. I am now working as a secretary."³ Spence and Dennett went on to co-found the journal *Camerawork* in 1976 with the specific purpose of exploring "The Politics of Photography".⁴ Criticising the mainstream media's implicitly sexist and racist attitudes, *Camerawork*'s inaugural editorial pointed out the poverty of current photographic mainstream's obsession with social realism and photojournalism:

More often than not it is an unjustifiably voyeuristic and one-sided account of the stark situation in which many people are forced to live - or of the joys and sorrows of

¹JACQUILINE MORREAU and CATHERINE ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", in SARAH KENT and JAQUELINE MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Society, London, 1985, p23.

²Ibid.

³JO SPENCE/PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP, "Beyond the Family Album, Private Images, Public Conventions", *Three Perspectives on British Photography: Recent British Photography*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London, 1 June - 8th July 1979, p71.

⁴SPENCE, "The Politics of Photography", *Camerawork*, no.1, 1976.

celebrity life. [...] Printed in the mass press, or alongside the hi-fi and sherry adverts in the colour supplements, this imagery eventually becomes just another commodity for us to thumb through in our search for distraction or for the 'truth'.⁵

Rather than being a platform from which to explore a Burginian 'politics of representation',⁶ *Camera*work initially provided a showcase for photography recording social conditions and inequalities.⁷ Formed in 1974, The Hackney Flashers Collective, for example, originally aimed "to develop an ongoing activity in the area where they lived and worked, producing "what has become known as 'community photography' - or rather one of its many varieties."⁸ In keeping with this democratic spirit, community photography exhibitions, such as The Hackney Flashers' *Women and Work in Hackney* (20th September - 3rd October 1975) were available for hire. This allowed photography to function primarily as an educational tool, "a mirror to show events considered 'un-newsworthy' by the national press"⁹ such as women working in sweatshops, cleaning and child-minding. In such works the Flashers concentrated on the division of labour within the factory, examining the new problems facing women as industry adjusted to the 1975 Equal Pay Act by cutting wages and reorganising workforces into double day and evening shifts unsuitable for women. Unlike Burgin's practice, such community photography seemed to form a true alternative to the contaminations of modernist art's distribution network, being exhibited initially at the Hackney Town Hall in conjunction with the women's subcommittee of Hackney Trades Council, before travelling to the Half Moon Theatre.¹⁰ The critical success of community photography, nonetheless, remains debatable.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ See also JON BIRD, "The Politics of Representation", *BLOCK*, No.2, 1980, p40-44.

⁷ See PAUL CARTER, "Photography for the Community", *Camera*work, No.13, March 1979, p2-3.

⁸ LIZ HERON, "Hackney Flashers Collective: Who's still holding the camera?", in T. DENNET, D. EVANS, S. GOHL, AND J. SPENCE, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, London, September 1979, p125.

⁹ SPENCE, "The Politics of Photography".

¹⁰ In the 1980s, this democratic amateurism came under attack from new image feminists such as Jacqueline Morreau and Sarah Kent: "Lucy Lippard suggests that American women artists were able to use representation and narrative because of a highly visible and local woman's art movement which contextualised their work. English artists and historians tended to organise themselves into collectives of like-minded individuals and operate on the fringes of the art establishment." [...] "This attempt to undermine the formation of feminist hierarchies was not successful, and led to an expectation that women artists should remain relatively anonymous. The no-star system was in danger of reinforcing a male monopoly of the art world while making it very difficult for women artists to make a living." MORREAU and ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Society, London, 1985, p23. [...] *ibid.* footnote 14, p26.

The propagandist use of *Camerawork* was criticised from the political left and by photographers concerned that the magazine was itself deteriorating into photojournalism,¹¹ transforming into a political vehicle for the latest crisis with thematic issues such as ‘Lewisham: What are you taking pictures for?’¹² and ‘Reporting on Northern Ireland’.¹³ It was somewhat ironic that Spence intended *Camerawork* to oppose community photography. A more innovative visual tradition fostered by *Camerawork* was that of montage, the only form which presented a challenge to the social realism of the growing number of community photographers. Describing herself as an ‘educational photographer’, Spence had long been interested in deconstructing standardised forms of representation and subject matter. Although Spence had exhibited and educated from the late 1960s onwards, working mainly in documentary photography, the establishment of the Photography Workshop and *Camerawork* led to a series of innovative collaborations with social/feminist photographic collectives such as the Faces Group, the Camberwell Beauties and the Hackney Flashers.¹⁴ The first indication of a critical reaction came in July 1978, when the Hackney Flashers’ *Who’s Holding the Baby?* opened at Centerprise Community Project in Hackney:

The limitations of documentary photography became apparent with the completion of the *Women and Work in Hackney* exhibition. The photographs assumed a ‘window on the world’ through the camera and failed to question the notion of reality rooted in appearances. The photographs were positive and promoted self-recognition but could not expose the complex social and economic relationships within which women’s subordination is maintained.¹⁵

Rather than social realism, the exhibition consisted of cartoons, collage, montage, and graphics with photographs and text. (36 laminated panels 20x30”). As the Hackney Flashers gradually adopted a Burginian form of montage to “indicate the contradiction between women’s experience and its representation in the media”, their work began to appear less politically engaged, in stark contrast to their earlier work which often verged dangerously close to agit-prop. This shift was also met with Burgin’s Althusserian approach to the subject, the

¹¹ BOB LONG, “Camerawork and the Political Photographer”, *Camerawork*, No.16, November 1979, p10-15.

¹² See *Camerawork*, No.8. Special documentary edition on the National Front Race Riots.

¹³ See *Camerawork*, No.14, August 1979.

¹⁴ By 1977 The Hackney Flashers consisted of Jo Spence, Sally Greenhill, Margaret Murray (photographers), Ann Decker (graphic designer), Christine Roche (illustrator) Sue Trewelk (silk screen printer) and statistician Liz McGovern.

¹⁵ THE HACKNEY FLASHERS COLLECTIVE, “The Hackney Flashers Collective”, *Three Perspectives on British Photography: Recent British Photography*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London, 1 June - 8th July, p80.

contention that “Advertising doesn’t present us with a false image of ourselves; it places us in relation to its images in such a way that it thereby defines us.”¹⁶

For a long time now our visual arts diet has consisted of so called male compositional elements. Perhaps it is time the world reconnected with our means of making images.¹⁷

This form of practice had grown in popularity over the proceeding five years as iconoclasts abandoned text for image.

...in 1975 [...] Sally Gollop, isolated on the Isle of Wight, and Kate Walker in London started sending images which expressed the feelings of women confined by childcare and domestic responsibility. Sally, for example, took the form of a miniature kitchen dresser with shelves like bars across the window. Cups obscured the view and with the crockery hung hands and a brain.¹⁸

At the Women’s Art Conference in 1975, Goodall, a founder member of the Birmingham Women’s Art group, met Walker and the Communist historian and social worker Tricia Davis. Following Goodall’s suggestion, this group decided to establish a visual communication exchange by post in order to demonstrate the problems housebound women artists faced, torn between the needs of their families and the needs of their work.

The aims of sending art-works to each other are to develop a visual language that is accessible to women in that it corresponds with their own experiences, and to break down our isolation. Often we learn to understand ourselves by making visible in some form aspects of our lives - our process of selection often leads to self-discovery. Each person replies to the art-work she has received by making either an image/object that reflects something of her perspective on life, or that responds directly to the image she has received.¹⁹

The network, involving women from all over Britain and Germany, became known as *Feministo*, a pun relating to the male engendering of modern art found in avant-garde manifestos such as Marienetti’s infamously misogynist *Futurist Manifesto*, and the generic label given to the practice of *mail art*. The mail art produced by *Feministo* was based on their

¹⁶ LIZ HERON, “Hackney Flashers Collective: Who’s still holding the camera?”, in T. DENNET, D. EVANS, S. GOHL, AND J. SPENCE, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, London, September 1979, p125.

¹⁷ PHIL GOODALL, “Growing Point/Pains in ‘Feministo’”, 1977, reprinted in ROZSIKA PARKER and GRISELDA POLLOCK, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Woman’s Movement 1970-1985*, Pandora, London, 1987, p213.

¹⁸ PARKER, “Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife”, 1977, reprinted in PARKER and POLLOCK, *Framing Feminism*, p207.

¹⁹ GOODALL, “Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman”, 1977, reprinted in PARKER and POLLOCK, *Framing Feminism*, p206.

experiences as women, artists, mothers and domestic workers. While harbouring the ‘home-made’ character and small scale of much mail based activity, a great deal of *Feministo*’s production was allied to the project of photoconceptualism, utilising film, photo-collage and installation.²⁰

We use the skills we already have - “female”, “domestic” skills - crochet, knitting, sewing as well as more traditional “arty” skills.²¹

Significantly, *Feministo* was contaminating the minimal formal concerns of photoconceptualism by being aligned with what Goodall tacitly referred to as “female/domestic” skills. This helped to incapacitate the hitherto unquestioned conceptualist penchant for minimal forms and ascetic mediums by associating them with the artisanal and the ‘personal’, concerns which were an anathema to the conceptualist psyche:

Techniques vary. The show contains a great deal of assemblage, some painting and drawing, but a lot is knitted or sewn. On one level the use of craft validates women’s traditional skills and emphasises how much pleasure there is in, for example, crocheting. On another level it draws attention to the way our time and energy has been absorbed by our massive contribution to the domestic economy: knitting, sewing and furnishing the home.²²

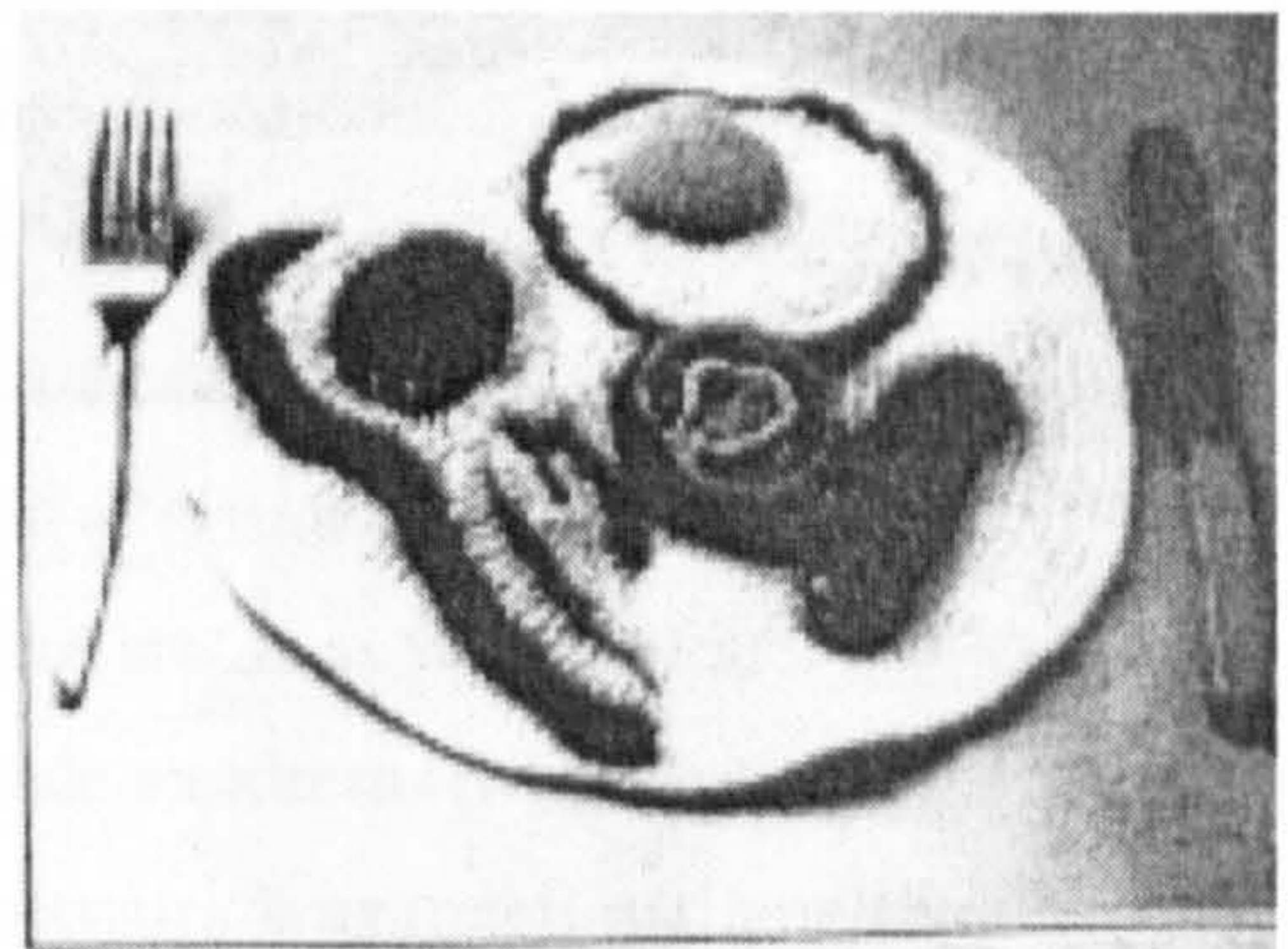


Figure 6.1 Anon./*Feministo*, *Crocheted Breakfast*, Knife, fork and wool. (1976).

Attempting to negate (male) modernist art’s long-standing anti-craft position was mainly intended to weaken its (patriarchal) position of infallibility. The separation between art and craft had functioned to differentiate between the creative activities of the ruling and working-classes, and by extension, the ‘differences’ between men and women.²³ This function was maintained in photo-conceptualism which was decidedly anti-artisanal, adopting an obsessive distaste for fine art values (albeit for politically progressive reasons).²⁴ This, of course, was a

²⁰ See TRICIA DAVIS and GOODALL, “Personally and Politically: Feminist Art Practice”, *Feminist Review*, No.1, 1979, p21-35.

²¹ GOODALL, “*Feministo*: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman”, p206.

²² PARKER, “Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife”, p208.

²³ “The symbolic significance craftworks had or have for women is normally overlooked despite the fact that feminist art historians continue to draw attention to the content and social role of craft production.” Ibid.

²⁴ “The contemporary Art scene is just another sphere where women have taken second place. Its elite and obscure nature has developed in the interests of capital. False standards, ethics and competition combine to isolate all artists and to inhibit the development of meaningful communication. Since ‘ideas’

style in its own right, cool, detached, super-minimal. Many *Feministo* artists adopted to opposite characteristics, hot, engaged, maximal, emphatically unprofessional: “Unlike much contemporary work in the fine Art scene, the work is non-technological, non-academic. The context, materials and approach are related to our everyday lives.”²⁵

However, it should be stressed that *Feministo* was not a coherent artists’ group, it was more a forum for an exchange of ideas: “The aim is communication, not perfect aesthetics.”²⁶ As such there were many artists associated with the group who mocked the associations between ‘femininity’ and ‘craft’, and whose work constituted a continuation of conceptualism’s anti-craft stance:

The materials also reflect women’s limited resources, and in some cases, a rejection of the “complex technology which has become an integral part of the established art scene”. And because much of the work is flimsy it has an impermanence which the women value. Most want to make statements rather than consumer objects.²⁷

In all, however, the vast majority of *Feministo* artists echoed photo-conceptualism’s Hegelianism, in so much as the movement was a deliberate venture to invert the preoccupations of a rival cultural fraternity in order to gain the facade of radicality. Inversion had been a long-standing tactic of feminist artists, giving them a method and a ‘stance’. Such negations, however, failed to answer difficult questions about their own status as works of art. *Feministo*’s miscellaneous negations were designed to provide an alternative to patriarchal practices by presenting them with a mirror. As such, the network was much maligned for confirming women in their role as housewives:

The security of the home and its deceptive freedom from intimate control operative in any work situation have their own backlash. You lose contact with any sense of the ‘real’ world, you think in frames of reference and a language looked down upon by most people. After a while you come to relish the misery of this isolation as a frying pan alternative to the fire of exposure as a possible failure; after years of being used to living in a home alone with your children, you become terrified of confronting the world of work and other people outside your family.²⁸

and ‘styles’ have become prestigious products, these factors unite especially against women. Our creativity is derived from non-prestigious folk traditions. It is diverse and integrated into our lives; it is cooked and eaten, washed and worn. Contemporary standards either ignore our creativity or rate it as second-class.” MONICA ROSS, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: A Postal Event”, 1977, reprinted in PARKER and POLLOCK, *Framing Feminism: Art*, p211.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ PARKER, “Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife”, p208.

²⁸ MICHELENE WANDOR quoted in *ibid.* p209.

There is a strong sense, then, that *Feministo*'s negations partially reinforced various aspects of the status quo; indeed the pre-eminence of photoconceptualism was necessary for their negation of artworld professionalism to have any meaning whatsoever. Moreover, it is clear that *Feministo*'s alleged insurgency was ancillary to obstinate metaphysical myths of 'femininity':

Our isolation is broken by recognising images that are instantly knowable as to do with women. [...] Some work on childbirth and our ambiguous relationship with our children. Many images indicating the use of the female by the press and advertising world. Works expressing suffocation and isolation in a personal life.²⁹

This fails to consider what would have happened had men become anonymously involved with the network. Could men's artworks not have been equally 'instantly knowable as to do with women'? This would have presented a number of problems. On the one hand, it would have raised questions concerning 'expression': without a theoretically inadequate recourse to 'genetic' labelling, how could anyone tell if women had made an artwork? Academic feminists such as Griselda Pollock, of course, were currently embarking on a thorough critique of 'expressionist' theory, being especially critical of genetic theories of female creativity. Hence, the idea that artworks could carry more significance to certain sectors of society simply because of who made them, then, should have been a target of such a critique. On the other hand, Goodall's description of *Feministo*'s output as including many "images indicating the use of the female by the press and advertising world" is most ironic. Was this not also *the* preoccupation of a number of male, photo-conceptualists? Would their work have been mistaken for women's work if it had been more artisanal? What if they were acting all along?

If *Feministo*'s emphasis on production seemed to lead to a number of problems, their concern with reception was equally problematic. Like most community photographers, *Feministo* avoided the conventional distribution network, choosing to show their mailings under the title *A Portrait of the Artist as Housewife* in Manchester during May 1976, and at Birmingham Central Library; Liverpool; and Coventry during 1977. This much, however, suggested that *Feministo* were unacquainted with the debates that had taken place within the mail art network. Despite being placed in unusual contexts, the public display of mail art was frowned upon by many mail artists since it encouraged their work to be publicly judged. Mail art was a pedagogic strategy and initiative that questioned the very basis of indentitary thinking in art. Mail art archives were personal collections where the individual had a collection of all reactions to their production. It could be exchanged, but the sender and receiver could only deal with each other's possibilities. This trapped *Feministo* and the Women's Art Group, who were attempting to escape from the artworld, while simultaneously seeking its sympathy for their cause. *Feministo* exhibitions failed to convey the fact that mail art can *never* remain stable

²⁹ GOODALL, "Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman", p206.

enough to seek recognition of its existence. Since mail art is created by self-declaration there can be no possibilities for the fixing of rules, no public display and no judgement.

In order to gain greater coverage for their activities, the Women's Art Group produced *Mama*, during 1977, a collage of feminist art events in the UK. Such group exhibitions were deliberately proscriptive to the extent that they forced 'individual groups' to hide under their wider (vague?) cultural agenda, a strategy deliberately designed to blur authorship. A corollary of this for some female artists was that the feminist 'theme' rendered their practical, collaborative contributions semantically mute. Griselda Pollock's schematic breakdown of the contrary positions adopted is enlightening:

Firstly, there is what I would call cultural feminism which is characterised by a commitment to alternative art practices. This means not only the rejection of establishment institutions, galleries, dealers, and so on, but also a refusal of existing exclusive definitions of Fine Art and of restriction to conventional art forms and media. The content of this kind of practice relates to specifically female experience, both physical and psychological as in body art, and social or political art. [...] A second group or position exists of women who already have a place of sorts within the establishment, [...] since most of these women are not part of the women's movement [...] their work as artists is the main determinant, their sex of marginal significance.³⁰

Mama was an attempt to move cultural feminists towards a "third position adopted by feminists who argue that it is important to acknowledge the significance of being a woman and that it is necessary to engage with and intervene in the main currents and institutions of contemporary art practice."³¹ Two major problems emerged here. Firstly, public display was clearly against the aims and beliefs of cultural feminists who wished to remain entirely separate from the establishment.³² Secondly, professional curation served to amplify the contradictions inherent in the public display of *mail art*. The group split before the end of 1977.

More problematic events were to occur. In 1978, *Feministo* was given a retrospective at the ICA in London. The display of Mail art in such a context is highly controversial to say the least. Mail art is both private and collective, a direct communication between individuals or groups of individuals. Galleries and museums play no part. Mail art is exchange only; to receive artists must give. As such, it is impossible to isolate individual mail art 'works' unless

³⁰ GRISELDA POLLOCK, "Feminism, Femininity and Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978", *Feminist Review*, No.2, 1979, p38.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² "This presents certain problems for this group of artists. Although it usually made and received in the context for which it is intended, its character and politics are such that it cannot be included in official survey map of current art practices in the way in which that map is at present drawn up by annual survey shows." POLLOCK, "Feminism, Femininity and Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978", p38. "Community arts became discredited in this country due to the inability of their practitioners to implement a rigorous analysis of the essentially political structures (Local Authorities, Arts Associations and the Arts Council) from which they principally derived their funds." HUGH ADAMS, "Anonymous is a Woman: The Work of Margaret Harrison", *Art Monthly*, Number 44, March 1981, p7.

they are sent to another mail artist. Archives are static; recycling invests energy in the network. *Feministo*'s mail art had served its function as a form of communication between mail artists, yet became art in the eyes of the traditional art-world represented by the ICA. Yet mail art in a gallery is not mail art, it *was* mail art. Hence, attempts by female mail artists to democratise the artworld clearly did not achieve their objectives, indeed they were largely responsible for establishing the culture of the 'proposal' which would lead to criticism of Arts Council Shows such as the Hayward Annuals over the following years. As we shall see, it was recognised from the beginning that the concept that proposals could create a democratic working environment was unsustainable. Proposals were needed in order to evaluate and confer status upon certain writings, works, events, and processes. The *Feministo* exhibition at the ICA confirmed that all art-related description relies on aspects of the artworld to sustain it, to provide a frame to work inside or outside, since destructive propositions slip into the implicit postulations of what they seek to contest:

The great Danger with the current situation in America ... is that this barrier will be accepted, that women artists will be content with a piece of the pie so long dominated by men ... rather than continuing to explore alternatives. It is crucial that art by women be not sucked back into the establishment and absorbed by it. If this happens, we shall find ourselves back where we started within another decade, with a few more women artists known in the artworld, with the same old system clouding the issues, and those women not included beginning to wonder why.³³

³³ LUCY LIPPARD, *From the Centre*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976, p139-40.

CHAPTER 7

Semi(o) Art?

The price of Conceptual Art's entry into polite society during the 1970s was surrender of its abrasiveness and anomalousness. By the middle of the decade much of what had been the Conceptual Art movement was transformed into 'radically responsible' publicity through appropriation of the methods of semiology. Though the ensuing conjunctions of pictures and texts were represented as subversive and demystificatory, the intellectual world in which they were produced and consumed existed to ratify precisely such forms of conjunction.¹

...socialist conceptual art which emerged in the 1970s - the disimbrication of the codes of the bourgeois. (In other words looking-down-the-nose-saving-the-working-class-from-advertising-bullshit. You can see it dignifying the pages of the egregious *BLOCK* magazine. Socialist Tony Hancockism I suppose you could call it. One of the particular deformations of the rhetorically didactic moment known as 'conceptual art' was the moment of pointing out that advertising was engaged in by capitalists who wished to persuade you to by their products.)²

Comparatively portentous anomalies had emerged in the epistemological fabric of critical photography at its inception in 1976. Burgin's paradigmatic argument that "left art practice [..was..] a matter of practical work in semiotics", was fraught with difficulties. For example, the Burginian project of convoking *all* aspects of culture into textual units for analysis *assumed* an analogy between visual representations and verbal language.³ This is implicit in the concept of "visual ideology", the view that representations define and construct the 'self'. Although this view is presumably legitimate, it is extremely difficult to clarify the mode in which visual representations interpellate the viewer, for while pictorial systems can have structure, they have no commonly available grammar. As such, it is difficult to explain how specific visual signifiers might determine the meanings of the whole. It is impractical to define visual signifiers since the changing function of representation precludes a universally valid model.

Writing of Nelson Goodman and E.H. Gombrich's theories of pictorial representation, Martin Kemp has demonstrated that relevant dimensions of resemblance differ from one representation to the next. Kemp illustrated this point by explaining that a dot might function as

¹ CHARLES HARRISON, *Art & Language: A Commentary on the Work of the Second Decade, Black Propaganda 1977-78*, Typewritten document in Art & Language Information File, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1990, p23.

² MEL RAMSDEN, "Art & Language: Mike Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Extracts from a Conversation with Sanda Miller", *Artscribe*, No.47, July/August 1984, p15.

³ "....it seemed at least a reasonable working hypothesis to assume that other forms of human communication might have evolved along basically similar lines." VICTOR BURGIN "Art, Common Sense and Photography", *Camera work*, No. 3, 1975.

the minimum sign for an eye within the context of a head-shaped outline, yet outside the context of such an outline more identifying characteristics need to be added.

...the answer to the problem of the schema is that it has no determined validity or essential form, but must simply be taken as referring to whatever pictorial motif may *stand* in a given context for the required object. Enough sense of 'eyeness' must be present in each case to permit identification, but the particular characteristics of 'eyeness' used in each case and their relative complexity will be extremely fluid.⁴

"Since we cannot fix on one dimension of resemblance as having importance over another," he concludes, "it would seem that resemblance is unsystematic and our recognition of it ad hoc." This in turn has important implications for semiotics, for, given their mechanism of reference, pictorial 'units' could be said to differ greatly from the units of verbal language: "We certainly should not assume that it works in any way like a unit of verbal language. I see no reason why a dot and the word EYE should be subject to the same semantic rules, since their basic mechanism of reference is quite different."⁵

Since it is difficult to claim that linguistic and non-linguistic signs are in any way comparable, Burgin's theoretical pretensions appear fragile. There is therefore a sense in which Burgin and his followers were relying on structuralism, not for its claims, but for its technicalities which created a powerful illusion of objectivity and critical integrity.⁶ It was in this sense that Burginian photography was said to have interpellated *its* audience: "[Burginian photography] takes as its premise the idea that it is up to the intelligentsia to both conceive of and analyse 'the world' as

⁴ MARTIN KEMP, "Seeing and Signs: E.H. Gombrich in Retrospect", *Art History*, Vol.7, No.2, 1984, p235.

⁵ *ibid.* "The condition is that the specifically visual nature of the system of reference in the visual arts is respected as essentially *visual* and not as inherently subordinate to a linguistic model. Arguments from language studies may provide useful analogies, but these arguments will be no better and no worse than any argument by analogy - the analogies should not be taken as reflecting an essential identity in the processes involved. Visual representation and languages are logically different in their relationships to represented objects, in that words do not necessarily embody any of the properties of the objects in order to perform their function adequately. They are also fundamentally different in their rules of composition and the way the compositions make their effects. A painting cannot by itself make a statement: it asserts nothing. It can only make statements through understood (or misunderstood) associations with such language as provides a context within which the visual image is mediated." *ibid.*, p241.

⁶ "...a nicely cooked piece of rationalism... To talk of the different faculties at work in cognition may serve philosophical clarity, but I believe it casts the processes of image making in a synthetic light which bears no relationship to the intermingled complexity of the actual mechanisms at work. The essential nature of visual image-making is that it exploits these processes in relation to the perceptual structures *specific to vision*." *ibid.* p237.

‘a picture’ and then proceed to change ‘the world’ by intervening in the picture.’⁷ The first essay of *Art-Language* Vol. 3 No.3, published in June 1976, opened in large bold type on the cover:

‘...THE TIMELESS LUMPENNESS OF A RADICAL CULTURAL LIFE; the gangrenous excrescence, stylishly exposed in quiet salons. The market for dry delicacies of pretentious gentility, the over-fed opinion, the corpulent choice, the leisured appropriation....’ [...] This was a critique - or a kind of description - within which the majority of persons and activities represented by *The Fox* or joined by its contributors were seen as potentially included, either as tokens or as lumpen equivalents of those tokens. But it was also directed at ‘socialism-in-one-artwork’, the executives of the fashionable caring culture, those whose claim that they would change the world reflects an anxiety lest they should change themselves.

Art - Language Vol.3 no. 4, (*Fox 4*), published in October 1976, addressed the fashion for semiological art and ‘university art’ (in connection with which the American journal *October* was named as a culprit). [Figure 7.1 Illustration from *Art - Language* Vol.3 no. 4, (*Fox 4*)] Art & Language (A&L)⁸ seen Burgin’s form of practice as manifestly illusionary. Burgin *et al* were in fact *producing* the conditions they intended to resolve, improving a flawed picture of their own conception:

In his distrust of his own ideological position, the fearless exposé develops (cultural) techniques rather than accept the assertion that production is an historical (complex dialectical) rather than a psychological task. There’s no stake in the objective conditions of production since fearful horror-shock is a project for approaching what the fearless Kunstler believes are basic conditions... his defence or quantification of his ‘objective conditions’.⁹



⁷ ART & LANGUAGE, “The French Disease”, *Art -Language* Vol.3 No.4, October 1976 (*Fox 4*), p33. “One common assumption was that artists and intellectuals are empowered to create and to uncover meaning by virtue of their occupancy of some higher realm - some level of consciousness above that at which meaning is supposedly determined for the unenlightened mass. The image of the mass in need of enlightenment was necessary to the success of Semio-art; necessary, that is to say, to its claims to be demystificatory, and (thus) ‘emancipatory’.” CHARLES HARRISON, *Art & Language: A Commentary on the Work of the Second Decade, Black Propaganda 1977-78*, p23.

⁸ Art & Language started in Coventry in 1967/68 with four people: Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell. In 1969, Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden and Charles Harrsion became associated with the group.

⁹ ART & LANGUAGE, “In Contradiction”, *Art -Language* Vol.3 No.4, October 1976 (*Fox 4*), p14. This view had been expressed in the Art and Social Purpose Edition of *Studio International* earlier in 1976: “Such work only reinforces the minorities’ cultural belief in its own authenticity by representation of mass ideology in the form of primitive rhetoric. It becomes a manifestation of the same kind of cultural imperialism on the level of style of all forms of ideology and consciousness which is perhaps most manifest in the illustration from *Vogue* incorporated in Jonathan Miles’s and John Stezaker’s *Captions (of Cultural Détente)*. ROSETTA BROOKS, “Please, No Slogans”, *Studio International*, March/April 1976.

Romanticism lionised the artist. Formalism focused on the art object. Semio-Art sought to understand representations produced by other people. Semio-Art was based on logical operations instead of the intuition of perceptual gestalts. The search for iconic form was abandoned in favour of an aesthetic based on propositional logic. Drawing on parallels between visual representation and language, Semio-Artists turned from the considerations of formal perception to approach culture in self-analytic conceptual terms. A&L's criticism of this approach might appear hypocritical given that they had been instrumental in adapting structural linguistics as a conceptual reference for assessing art's methodological integrity in the late 1960s. A&L were important co-authors of the semiological aesthetics developed from the theories of Saussure, Barthes, Chomsky, Wittgenstein, Lacan and Levi-Strauss (among others). Their realisation that the figure of speech had more to do with what could be known than the subject it addressed, prompted a number of artists to abandon philosophical and psychological models for understanding art. The new anti-aesthetic soon created the assumption that art was a form of logic that could be understood through language based theory. By the early 1970s, a large number of conceptual artists had become concerned with producing art that established its own context within the dialectics of aesthetic discourse. The intent was to provoke aesthetic sensibilities into the realisation of art as a semiotic device.

A&L and Semio-Artists therefore undoubtedly found commonality in their emphasis on language. However, while rejecting what earlier movements took for granted - that art communicates non-discursive ontological knowledge - Semio-Artists failed to explore the possibility of 'knowledge' that logic cannot arrive at, producing what Kemp calls a "creative tangle of intuitions, perceptions, rationalisations and actions which fire with multi-layered simultaneity [...] a bubbling cauldron of cerebral processes."¹⁰ According to A&L, Semio-Artists had entrenched themselves behind a reductive and arrogant hypothesis that denied the relevance of the numinous art experience. A&L responded appropriately by developing an intentionally ineffective practice:

Our work has been, is, and will be done, not made.¹¹ [...] Ideological material must be located where we can point out its historical modalities. And this means that being wrong (as distinct from fraudulent or stupid, etc.) is an historical product of transitional practice. You can't have fights about vanguard orthodoxy because all decisions have a nomothetic purport subject to the closure of assiduous librarianship.¹²

¹⁰ KEMP, "Seeing and Signs", p237.

¹¹ ART & LANGUAGE, "Us, Us and Away", *Art -Language* Vol.3 No.4, October 1976 (Fox 4), p1.

¹² ART & LANGUAGE, "In Contradiction", *ibid.* p13.

For A&L, as for Clark, art practice needed to tread a thin line between success and failure.

“Attempts to identify organising principles always failed or were sabotaged, while the possibility of continuing activity in the end always required that intellectual production be taken at least initially on trust.”¹³

Art & Language’s position was that the productions of ‘Semio-art’ were not possibly transparent or ‘responsible’ since mystification and irony are inevitably entailed by the signifying materials of artistic practice. No claim was made for the relative virtue of Art & Language’s work (nor could such a claim have been easily sustained in light of Art & Language’s recent internal struggles. Exhibited works of 1977-78 were travesties of various kinds, designed to dramatise irony and mystification in the conjunction of pictures and texts. These were displays made with dirty hands, forms of ‘black propaganda’ launched on the supposedly untendentous - ‘ideologically proper’ - world of semiotic systematicness. The work was resolutely irresponsible.¹⁴

A good example of such a work was the large oil painting *Ils donnet leur Sang; donnez votre Travail*, painted by Baldwin, Harrison, Pilkington and Ramsden, and exhibited at the Robert Self Gallery, London, December 1977 - January 1978 [Figure 7.2]. The subject was taken from a poster produced by



the Nazis in 1942 to recruit industrial labour in Vichy France. The original poster showed an idealised factory, with workers marching triumphantly through its gates. A soldier lay wounded to remind the workers of the ‘cause’ for which they were labouring. A&L removed the soldier as a means of making the image ideologically unstable.¹⁵ A connection was thereby suggested between the idealisations of the working class expressed in the original and “those associated with the (possibly left-wing) avant-garde, with art-and-social purpose as its essential services” (*Art-*

¹³ HARRISON, “The Conditions of Problems”, *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p98.

¹⁴ CHARLES HARRISON, *Art & Language: A Commentary on the Work of the Second Decade, Black Propaganda 1977-78*, p23.

¹⁵ See PETER SMITH, “Art & Language”, *Art Monthly*, Number 13, December/January 1977-78, p28-29.

Language Vol.4 No.2 October 1977).¹⁶ In caustic response to Burgin's *What does Possession Mean to you?*, a large poster was made of this image and displayed in the Eldon Shopping Centre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1977.

Mike Baldwin's conviction that an intentional *ineffectiveness*, an elitist indifference towards practical goals, would render production unamenable to co-option by the manipulative and managerial discourses of the culture,¹⁷ compelled A&L to assault the related problems of myth and instrumental reason in Semio-art. According to Barthes' famous formulation, myth makes us think that things are 'natural', not the products of historical configurations, produced by contingent circumstances. Myths encourage a set of subject identifications, creating a comforting sustaining pleasure, yet imprison and seduce their consumers forcing them to accept the power of ideology. A&L's claim that "mystification and irony are inevitably entailed by the signifying materials of artistic practice" is related to the outcome of attempts to de-mystify the production of art through the application of critical reason. In liberating us from corruptible and oppressive ideological traditions, reason could imprison us in our cerebral affectations. As objects and predictable forces begin to act in calculable ways, consciousness-raising and emancipation fashion immunity in the form of a thoroughly concealed domination. By 'exposing' the false forms of exploitation Semio-artists created a pervasive image, a substitute world full of mythological representations which needed to be unmasked and which would automatically lose their claim to 'nature' once unmasked by reason. Hence, for the Semio-artist, the world was not only objectified, it was full of myths only their reason could save us from, revealing a paradise in which everything was finally opaque. Hence, despite its claims to redress the myth of the Heroic Modern Artist, the Nietzschean 'Urman', Semio-art was completely pervaded with this romantic attitude, transfixed as it was by a culture it imagined it could successfully overmaster simply by unmasking it. Yet often enough, this urge to unmask the other is itself a mask for an urge to partake: either to gaze unhampered by a guilty conscience, or enjoy the apparent rewards it pretends to despise by further hypnotising an already bored and hypnotised audience. Sobering reminders were not enough.

Pace Walter Benjamin, given the aestheticisation of politics (e.g. by Fascism, though the tendency is prevailing in less dramatic forms) and the politicisation of aesthetics (e.g. in the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism', though etc. ... *mutatis mutandis*) the task of artistic production is to remain critical and intractable with respect to both tendencies, while acknowledging the actuality of their contextualising power and the possibility of their ghostly symmetry.¹⁸

¹⁶ HARRISON and FRED ORTON, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, Editions E. Fabre, Paris, April 1982, p59.

¹⁷ HARRISON, "The Conditions of Problems", p117.

¹⁸ HARRISON and ORTON, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, p60.

For A&L, further contradictions lay at the heart of Semio-art in that its advocacy of a conceptual education actually encouraged a mythological split between artists and viewers, between the semiologist-as-hero, and the world, a split most commonly characterised as being between 'art' and 'life'. In direct contrast, A&L advocated breaking "up the regimentation of structures which makes some people 'experts', some 'learners'..."¹⁹ In this, A&L might be said to have aimed to emphasise the directed accumulation of skills and knowledge, including self-knowledge, in every day life²⁰: "since speakers and hearers exist and act in a world of other utterances, echoes and whispers, utterance is part-conversational, part-manipulative."²¹

The overall aim of teaching as envisaged within A&L was to enable and assist student self-activity, and positively not to produce acolytes. Students were seen this time not as potential recruits to A&L (though this was not ruled out) but as agents on their own behalf once the grounds for social activity and learning were established. A&L's *School* project of 1975-6²² involved the production and circulation of anonymous posters intended to provide a rallying-point for those who made the identification.²³

While A&L's work may have constituted a valid satirical critique of Burgin's practice, it simultaneously mirrored many of its presumed failings.²⁴ Their aim to redress the "all-too-

¹⁹ ART & LANGUAGE, "Somewhere to begin", *Art-Language*, Vol. 3, No. 1: 'Draft for an Anti-Textbook', September 1974, p2.

²⁰ "For centuries teachers worked with the model that what they did in the classroom constituted 'Education' and that they were people different in kind from other people. They were 'Educators'. With the upheavals of the twentieth century, teachers began to realise that what went on outside the classroom was often of far greater educational significance than what went on inside. Moreover it was realised that everyone is an 'educator' in so far as we all learn from one another. There are two responses to these insights. The one is to advocate 'de-schooling society', to deny the importance of credits, degrees and grades, and to emphasise the directed accumulation of skills and knowledge, including self-knowledge, in every day life. The opposite is to advocate a 'classical', that is book-orientated, conceptual education, to emphasise the difference between teachers and students, between the academy and the world." RICHARD HERTZ, "Philosophical Foundations of Modern Art", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 18, 1978, p246-247.

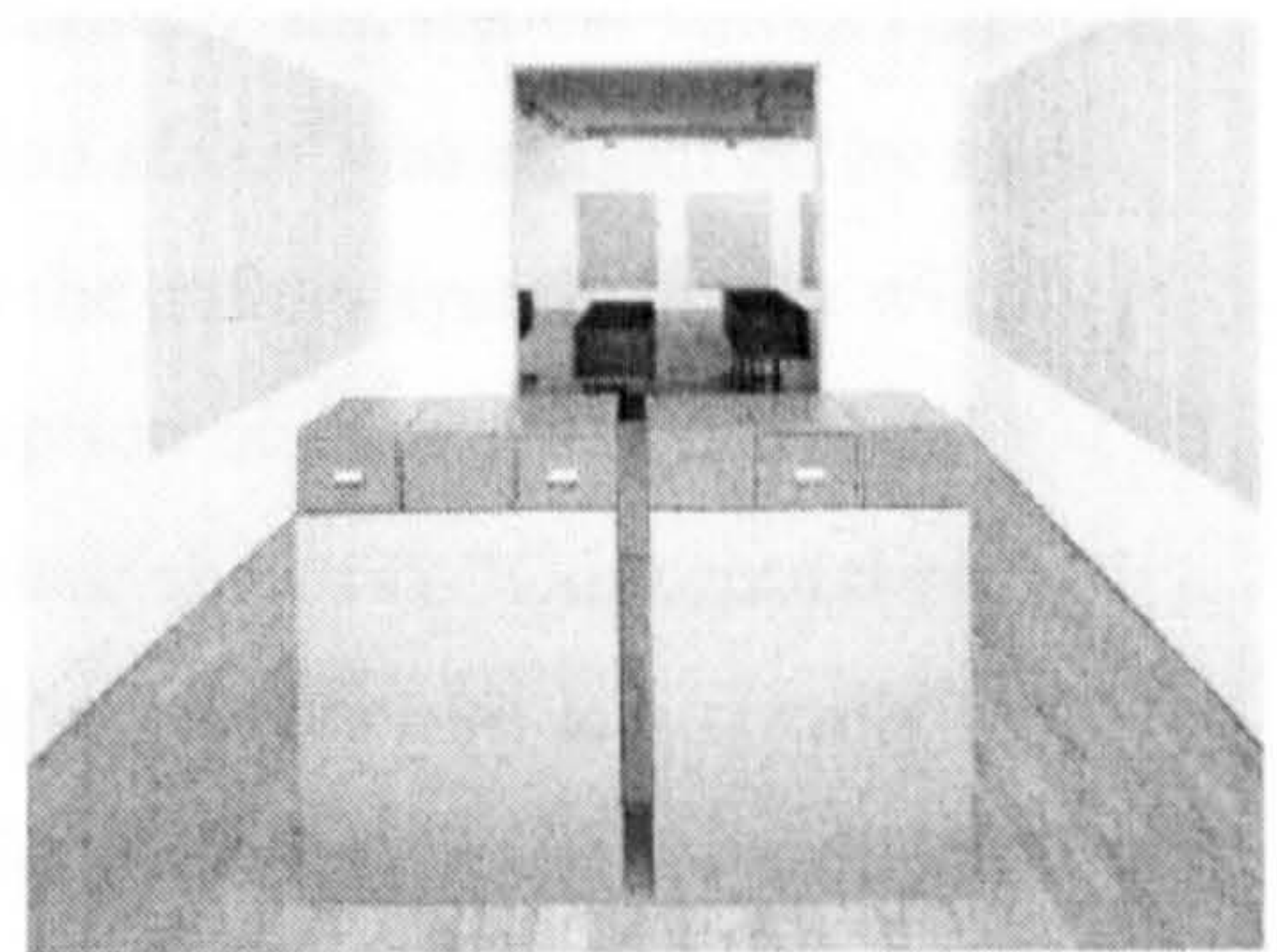
²¹ HARRISON, "The Conditions of Problems", p101.

²² "A feasible response to these questions will have to propose the dialectic (the culturing reciprocity) between artists (who may have some grasp of their socio-historical situation) and art students (who may or may not have such a grasp) outside the bureaucratising range of institutions", ART & LANGUAGE, "Punitive Art Practice in Britain is Focused on the Art Schools...", ART & LANGUAGE in *Art & Language* 1966-1975, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, September 1975.

²³ HARRISON and ORTON, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, p54.

²⁴ "The loyal opposition to Art with Social Purpose, typified by Art & Language (+ lines emanating mainly from Marcel Duchamp) propagates the identical contempt for the working class and for the majority of artists, but this time in its contrary, frankly scholastic/occult form." JEFFREY STEELE, "Notes Towards Some Theses Against the New Kitsch", *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p20.

automatic virtue of art as ‘theory’”²⁵ by reasserting “the opacity of art”²⁶ was to be achieved by way of the most philosophically esoteric and linguistically abstruse methods obtainable, (Re: “You can’t have fights about vanguard orthodoxy because all decisions have a nomothetic purport subject to the closure of assiduous librarianship.”²⁷) Accompanying a “refusal to signify” with a “refusal to clarify”²⁸ was a deliberately absurd theoretical challenge to Burgin, especially if read as a manneristic or satirical assault on his inflated poststructuralist prose. In another sense, it functioned as part of A&L’s long-running analytical critique of the chain of dualisms on which rest on the fundamental switch (the on/off) of Aristotle’s logic (A cannot be both A and not-A at the same time. Either/or.) What remains unclear, however, is how such cryptic rhetorical anomalies could be seen to aid in the dissolution of differences between teachers and students, between the academy and the world. One of Mel Ramsden’s more succinct statements of the reasoning behind the 1972 *Documenta Index* [Figure 7.3, *Index at the Lisson Gallery in 1972*] is informative: “In really old fashioned Situationist International terms, it requests of the consumer to be a participant, in a way. And if the consumer was not a participant, then the work did not mean ‘bugger off’ - it failed to signify.”²⁹



“Critics who dismissed this art as botched philosophy were as far from the point as anyone would be who tried to dismiss a Cubist collage on the grounds that it was poor journalism”.³⁰ For many, however, A&L widened the gap, being too intellectual for the asinine and too asinine for the intellectual:

²⁵ HARRISON, “‘Seeing’ and ‘Describing’: the Artists’ Studio”, *Essays on Art & Language*, p157.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ ART & LANGUAGE, “In Contradiction”, p13.

²⁸ HARRISON, “The Conditions of Problems”, p98.

²⁹ RAMSDEN, “Art & Language: Mike Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Extracts from a Conversation with Sanda Miller”, p14.

³⁰ BRANDON TAYLOR, “Textual Art”, *Artscribe*, No. 1, January-February 1976, p11. A&L were not intentionally philosophical. Despite their intellectual passions, they presented themselves as artists. Their approach was intuitive rather than analytical: “It is empirically false, even absurd to suggest that Conceptual Art’s value is supposed to lie in its acceptability as a philosophical thesis.” ART & LANGUAGE, “Artists and Philosophers”, *Art Monthly*, Number 26, May 1979, p34.

...if you're going to bring theory to art then the theory has to be potentially publicly accessible. [...] Art & Language have no currency whatsoever, if that was ever their intention, outside the artworld; and in fact I don't think it was their intention, I think that they were more like the Surrealists, I think that's how they thought of themselves: as an avant-gardist group making provocations. I think you should see their work mainly as satire, even though I don't think they intended themselves all the time to be satirical.³¹

A&L's criticisms also seem fallacious when held against Community Photography, despite the fact that they similarly advocated group activity as a means to suppress the logic of self-expression.³² One problem with the productions of A&L was that they tended to have more of a 'persona' than those associated with more loosely affiliated groups of artists. Unquestionably, the 'personalities' of the members of A&L were neatly obliterated, but the development of a replacement historical materialist 'identity' with its own tropes and metaphors, and characteristic critical values helped to subtly undermine the participant's intentions. This 'identification effect' was magnified by such factors as the high cost of *Art-Language* journal, A&L's ties to the gallery system, and a wilful obscurantism all of which ensured that the production and reception of their work remained closely tied to a cognoscenti conversant with the intricacies of their rhetoric: "Conceptual art emerged, certainly in our hands, as an attempt to restrict reflective content and didactically to reduce the consumer's contribution, in order to produce an artist's closure on the content of the work."³³

Charles Harrison was fundamentally important in launching conceptual art in England, because until that time, [*When Attitudes Become Form* at the ICA in 1969] the so-called conceptual artists were working in isolation; I thought nobody else was doing anything like the kind of work I was doing. [...] Now what happened subsequently to that is that Charles became ever more closely involved, at both a personal and professional level with the members of Art & Language, who were, you know, really quite aggressive in their self-marketing. Now he didn't join them and drop his activities as a critic, he continued being a critic, but given that he was now a member of Art & Language this helped establish a platform for Art & Language. That is there was always a preference whenever anything got written by Charles, to emphasise the historical importance of Art & Language.³⁴

³¹ VICTOR BURGIN in JOHN ROBERTS ed., "Interview with Victor Burgin", *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, Camerawords, London, 1997, p89.

³² "The very formation of Art & Language in 1968 could be seen as symptomatic of dissent from prevailing stereotypes of artistic personality and of the individual artistic career, while the *Documenta Index* of 1972 is open to interpretation as a form of artistic device by means of which conversation (or the generation of meaning) is represented and examined in abstraction from actual conversationalists (or authors)." HARRISON, "The Conditions of Problems", p91.

³³ RAMSDEN, "Art & Language: Mike Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Extracts from a Conversation with Sanda Miller", p15.

³⁴ BURGIN in ROBERTS ed., "Interview with Victor Burgin", p87.

Indeed, since beginning work as an Art Historian with the Open University in January 1977, Charles Harrison has sought to guarantee that A&L's practice was *irrecoverably* written into the History of Art since the late 1960s, much as Clement Greenberg had previously monopolised and institutionalised his favoured brand of formalism. Open University Course A316 *Modern Art: Practices and Debates*, stands as an informative and educational testament the possibilities of critical gerrymandering.³⁵

Although dominated by the collaborative efforts of Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell from its first appearance in 1969, *Art - Language* had initially been open to contributions. Efforts were made to democratise A&L's practice in 1969 when Atkinson invited New York based conceptualists Joseph Kosuth, Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden to contribute to the group. Just as groups must be made, they demand to be unmade. The consequences of a group of artists' actions depends upon what others do, and, thus, the preferences they reveal should depend upon what preferences they think others will reveal. This interdependence was fundamental to A&L during the first half of the seventies, and one way to model it is to interpret the situations that each artist had to confront so that those situations include estimates of other's possible choices. However, if artists condition their choices on what they believe other people will do, then they should assume that others will do the same. To complicate matters further, the motives of artists associated with A&L were rarely identical during their first six years. The fates of group members were both interdependent and conflictual and any assumption about group activities as benign environments is untenable. A&L understandably would offer no specific points of departure: "We suppose that a 'psychological defence' depends upon something like 'not sticking to the text'. But who's right about what 'the text' is?"³⁶

To what extent did A&L's attempt to take both interdependence and conflict into account, assume that artists would collaborate to the extent of taking the calculations and dissimilar goals of others into consideration? The ironies of this situation were utilised profitably to negate the organisation of the group, allowing some participants to operate on the fringes of the

³⁵ There is, of course, nothing new in the deliberate historification of art practice. Most avant-garde groups of the early 20th century vastly over-estimated their importance in their manifestos in order to create an instant genealogy, most notably Marinetti's Futurist manifesto which appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro*! In the early 1980s Stewart Home wrote a series of manifestos for the small, and relatively insignificant Neoist Cultural Conspiracy which sought to emphasise and satirise this fact: "Neoism is a cultural movement influenced by Futurism, Dada, Fluxus and Punk, which emerged from the Mail Art Network of the late seventies. Neoism is a methodology for manufacturing art history. The idea is to generate interest in the work and personalities of the various individuals who are said to constitute the movement. Neoists want to escape from the 'prison of art and 'change the world'. With this end in mind, they present capitalist society with an angst-ridden image of itself." ANON (STEWART HOME) "Viva Neoism", reprinted in HOME, *Neoist Manifestos*, AK Press, Stirling 1991, p21.

³⁶ ART & LANGUAGE, "Artists and Philosophers", p34.

group's implied 'rules'. However, as A&L gradually developed its own neuroses, their nomenclature appeared increasingly unable to contain the group's production, allowing artists to distance their concerns as much as possible from the organisation which initiated their participation in the game. This much was taken as granted. Given Atkinson and Baldwin's debt to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, it could never have been the business of A&L to resolve contradiction, but to make it possible for artists and viewers to get a clear view of the state of affairs *before* the contradiction *might* be resolved.³⁷ However, there was the danger that the appearance of designed incompetence might be sustained *too* successfully, that gaps and weaknesses in the administration of A&L might allow some members to develop the kinds of practice and theory which certain members of A&L found repugnant, namely, that A&L might become associated with 'Political Art' or with the less rigorous forms of 'Conceptual Art'. By accentuating the opacity of their practical and theoretical work, A&L sought to ensure that their work would resist appropriation into the discourse of social or 'realist' art.

It was for this reason that Kosuth's involvement was subsequently suppressed by Ramsden and the contingent of A&L based around Banbury, North Oxfordshire.³⁸ *The Fox*, edited by Ramsden and published by Kosuth's A&L Foundation Inc. New York, was appropriated by 'Provisional' Art & Language in its fourth edition in order to censor its brand of insistent and anti-intellectual Marxism.³⁹ The vaunted 'Marxism' of *The Fox* was seen from England as largely 'automatic'. Its lack of sophistication and dogmatic tone seemed to betray the adoption of a fashionably 'oppositional' attitude:⁴⁰

³⁷ See LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN *Philosophical Investigations* 125.

³⁸ "[*The Fox*, Issue 3, Spring 1976] carried three articles from A & L in England, which can be seen as typical of a range of English responses to *Fox* 2. The first, 'Having-your-heart-in-the-right-place is not making History', was written by Harrison in a barely ironic Stalinist tone, to suggest the incompatibility between the pursuit of artistic liberalism and the actual practices entailed by (though not necessarily invoked in) talk about 'revolution' and the dictatorship of the Proletariat. [...] The second contribution from England was a more quorate text, 'The Worst of all Allies', which took up the principle of ad hominem attack made plausible and attractive by Ramsden's 'Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe...' text published in *Fox* 2. [...] The third English contribution. 'Chris Smith confronts Norman Trotsky and Dame Flora Luxembourg, many of their colleagues, furry and feathered friends', was critical of the artistic agonising and volunteering detected in *Fox* 2." HARRISON and ORTON, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, p45.

³⁹ See IAN BURN, "Utopian Prayers and Infantile Marxism", *Artforum*, April 1975.

⁴⁰ "[In the mid-1970s] some members of the group in England wanted to dissociate themselves from what they saw as an insistent and anti-intellectual form of Marxism and watched with concern as the name - or mythology of Art & Language became confused with a welter of endeavours, some apparently commensurable with an Art & Language identity, others not". [...] "It was the perception of many of those involved in the extension of Art & Language activities in New York that they were engaged in forms of political consciousness-raising and in actual forms of political struggle. The tendency in England was to behave as if the artistic engagement with politics were a kind of allegorical game - though nonetheless critically determined or serious in being so." HARRISON, "The Conditions of Problems", p120-121.

The Fox became a sort of political magazine, 'the radical alternative to *Artforum*'- and it surely looked it. ...suddenly it became something which was so uncontrollable and very 'Political'. [...] We had to make a conscious decision to end *The Fox* because it had turned into such a monster. It was essentially being *pigeon-holed* as the 'alternative magazine'.

In 1977 dramatic changes took place within the group. Membership dropped from thirty to the three members who still constitute the group (Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden and Charles Harrison). Despite A&L's dispute with their American contingent, the annexation of *The Fox* was an aristocratic phenomenon, a standardising of all materialist opinion according to the model of totalitarianism. "The end of *The Fox* was an unbelievable purge - people fell out, people practically committed suicide, people threatened each other with jail. [...] Joseph Kosuth was denied any possible practical relationship with Art & Language; he could not mention Art & Language in the same breath as his own work again. This was done very deliberately. [...] *The Fox* was killed by a conspiracy, not by a 'naturally' democratic decision."⁴¹ This was one of many reasons which lead to Atkinson's departure from A&L in 1975. Their dispute with this ex-member continues to this day.

Who cares finally about the definition of art? What does it matter? I can't see it, so ultimately it comes down to this: either you get it or you don't and I just never got it, they were disappearing up their own fundamentals, as far as I was concerned. And my argument was precisely that, I said the debate wasn't getting anywhere, you've got to get in to some sort of engagement with the social world. Well subsequently they made their own turn to politics, I'm not claiming that I was the one who kicked them into it, but I think the writing was on the wall, it was there for them to see, but it took them a long time to get there. [...] Definitions of art are to be performed in practice within art institutions.⁴²

In contrast to A&L's despotism, community art was almost entirely inclusive, albeit that it was often non-participative in practice.⁴³ Notwithstanding the educational imperatives of the initiated, the possibility of *becoming* a community artist remained very open. The only degree of closure which remained was that it was only by *practising* community art that anyone would get an

⁴¹ MIKE BALDWIN, "Art & Language: Mike Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Extracts from a Conversation with Sanda Miller", p16.

⁴² BURGIN in ROBERTS ed., "Interview with Victor Burgin", p90-91.

⁴³ "I thought that what Art & Language were doing was purely formalist and therefore uninteresting. It seemed quite clear that they were mimicking philosophers, from the form of their publications, the style of their language, but more substantially they were adopting the subject position of the philosopher as it then existed in Britain in relation to the rest of the intellectual world. Philosophers set themselves up as the accountants of the intellectual world and would decide if this or that pronouncement by a historian, or this or that statement by a political economist, was 'valid', according to whether or not it would meet their criteria of truth or value or not." *ibid.* p88. In fact, A&L were as sceptical of philosophers claims to knowledge as Burgin now claims to be.

understanding of what it might be about, or of what it might become. While this is also true of mail art, the democratic opportunities for those excluded from the artworld were increased for participants in the *Feministo* network who could send anything they made to any other member they wished, thereby ensuring that they always received a critical audience for their work. Would-be mail artists inaugurated themselves simply by sending mail to another member of the network; from which point, 'education' was an organic, accumulative process.

It was perhaps due to the overwhelming popularity of such modes of production that A&L's interventions made little institutional impact on the artworld. By the late 1970s, diluted and hackneyed concepts of 'image-text' had come to dictate not only the form of individual artists' productions, but the concerns of curators and art historians up and down the country.

...what we were all wrong to be persuaded of was that in suddenly becoming more theoretical, art had to cease being visual. It did not.⁴⁴

For example, in 1977, the Arts Council invited Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, to purchase work by British artists. Introducing his travelling exhibition of artists using word and image, Fuchs wrote:

A photograph of a tree on a hill or a text describing a hill, are somehow closer to the real thing they portray than in a painting - provided the photograph and the text are unadorned and plainly descriptive. The straight photograph and the plain text are almost reality itself. In recent years a number of young artists have become interested in making work which would relate to the real world in a new way - work that would deal with reality directly and openly.⁴⁵

That Fuchs (and many others) had entirely missed the point of the new photography was a point sorely noted in 1979 when the controversial *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography* exhibition opened at the Hayward Gallery in London.⁴⁶ The exhibition, organised by Paul Hill, Angela Kelly and John Tagg, "was supposed to be the first biennial British photography

⁴⁴ TAYLOR, "Textual Art", p11.

⁴⁵ RUDI H. FUCHS, "Introduction", *Languages: An Exhibition of Artists Using Word and Image*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Harlow, 1979, p3.

⁴⁶ PAUL HILL, ANGELA KELLY AND JOHN TAGG, *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography*, Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, London, 1 June - 8th July 1979.

show. Art had its annual at the Hayward, so photography, being only half as important, was going to be given a national show every other year.”⁴⁷ Tagg discredited the

idea - so dear to the left-liberal documentary tradition - that the ‘truth’ of photographic representation lies somewhere ‘outside’ or ‘behind’ the image and the institutional framework within which it is represented. The struggle around ‘truth’ or the status of ‘truth’ in photography is not a struggle for something ‘outside’ or a struggle ‘in favour’ of ‘truth’. It is a battle around the rules, operative in our society, according to which ‘true’ and ‘false’ representations are separated. It is a battle around those institutions which are privileged in our society to produce and transmit ‘true’ discourse.⁴⁸

Three Perspectives was certainly one of the most representative and concise presentations of critical photography. It was, however, to be the last: “The Arts Council officials took one look at the show and the complaints from conservatives and, mysteriously, it never happened again.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ JOHN TAGG, “Practising Theories: an Interview with Joanne Lukitsh”, *Afterimage*, vol. 15, no.6, January 1988, p6-10, reprinted in *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field*, Macmillan, London, 1992, p74.

⁴⁸ TAGG, “A Socialist Perspective on Photographic Practice”, *Three Perspectives on British Photography*, p71.

⁴⁹ TAGG, “Practising Theories: an Interview with Joanne Lukitsh”, p74.

CHAPTER 8

Radical Academicism

On the left, the prevailing view of advertising tends to be one of disapproval. [...] ...the rhetorical structures of advertising are indifferent to the emotional and ideological value of the contents they handle; much as, for example, an arithmetical structure like 2 plus 2 equals 4 'doesn't care' whether we are adding up taxi cabs or tomatoes. In this view, therefore, there is no reason why, once the devices of advertising have been isolated by semiotic analysis, they may not be 're-cycled' in counter-ideological message-making.¹

Social realism is not realist in the way it pretends to be. It's a regressive language. At least montage through juxtaposition can engage with contradictory images and realities, but it's important to go beyond that to achieve positive, more integrated visual languages. [...] The] montage idea of reality as the product of a simple juxtaposition - [is] itself a very limited visual language which always seems to need to mobilise the rhetoric of capital or labour to make its point.²

Such assumptions, it had been observed, are the propitious fantasies of a section of the ruling class. In such fantasies, the process of enlightenment which is not a process of emancipation results in an audience attractive to the superior ideological resources of the ruling class. The attraction of this audience lies in its very forms of critical perception and dissidence which may now be exploited as pluralistic balm.³

By 1979, Semio-Art had provided the institutional framework for a plethora of cultural analysts as chillingly consistent in their aims and methods as the rationalised society to which they were opposed, steering many potential artists towards a 'post-productivist' position.⁴ Tagg's contribution to *Three Perspectives* represented something of a climax of Burgin's 'linguistic turn', a complete shift from the contingencies of practice towards the manipulative and managerial discourse of 'Theory', his distaste for 'fine art photography' precipitating something of a crisis in art history and in the practice of conceptually based photography.

¹ VICTOR BURGIN "Art, Common Sense and Photography", *Camerawork*, No. 3, 1975.

² STUART HALL, "Stuart Hall: Left in Sight", *Camerawork* 29, Winter 1983/84, p18. Hall's argument is remarkably similar to Herbert Marcuse's critique of Berlin dada in *Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, as 'adapted' by Peter Fuller in the early 1980s: "[Rudi Fuchs] does not understand the imaginative work of the artist, or the way in which he creates a transitional reality, neither objective nor subjective, through transforming his physical and conventional materials into a new and convincing whole. [...] 'Renunciation of the aesthetic form', wrote Marcuse, 'is abdication of responsibility. It deprives art of the very form in which it can create that other reality within the established one - the cosmos of hope'." FULLER, "The Arts Council Collection", *Art Monthly*, Number 39, September 1980, p16.

³ CHARLES HARRISON, "On 'A Portrait of V. I. Lenin..'", *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p141.

⁴ Stuart Hall's practical proposals are also subject to this critique: "The left has to look around and see the language that consumer capitalism speaks to people in. It's very up to date with a high stress on technology. [...] The Left has to be professional. Just look at the slickness of adverts designed to appeal to the mass consumer." HALL, "Stuart Hall: Left in Sight", p18. This line of enquiry had already been pursued by punk, to little *political* effect. See Chapter 14 *Decline of the English Avant Garde*.

While taking account of the determinations exerted by the means of representation upon that which is represented, Tagg's anti-art historiography led him to adopt a mode of analysis which caused him to ascribe importance to photographs as political and historical texts. This was the logical conclusion of conceptualist photography. Art was not to become 'practical work in semiotics'. On the contrary, 'art' was to be abandoned entirely by the liberal left, to be replaced predominately by the academic practice of structuralist Marxism.

In such a climate, the emphasis quickly shifted from production to questions of *consumption*:

...there was a further argument with art history; for example Tim Clark's seminal work on realism which, for him, focused on a study of Courbet. What I wanted to suggest was that, if there is a crucial connection between debates about realism and an emergent social order, perhaps the significant debates on realism, on representations claiming the status of the real, do not go on in art criticism alone. Perhaps there are other levels of debate and negotiation which might take you to very different spaces...⁵

In 1979, Tagg's "different spaces" were remarkably similar to those explored by cultural analysts such as Hall and Paddy Whannel at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham during the early 1970s. Towards the end of the decade, Tagg, like Hall, had moved from an essentially left-Leavisite culturalism toward the work of Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Like Burgin, Tagg sought to bring these two approaches into critical dialogue with structuralism and post-structuralism, producing a complex and often conflictual historical-critical practice. As with Burgin, depoliticised structuralism imparted Tagg with an indifference to the cultural value of his object, bringing similar philosophical problems.⁶ Yet as his method became analytical, rather than evaluative, Tagg's contention that culture is as an endless continuum of signifying practices lead to a more stagnant form of endgame than was found in Burgin's practical work. The negation of artistry and evaluative 'art history' mainly encouraged the development of a 'radical' critical practice of a peculiarly retrospective nature, drawing attention away from the critical potential of current, practical work.

If Tagg was failing to make a successful raid on the artworld, like A&L, he was making fast inroads into Academia, being appointed as a research fellow at the School of Communication at the Central Polytechnic of London in 1977, and teaching at UCL, Goldsmiths, St. Martin's, Leeds University, and UCLA. At the end of the 1970s, Middlesex Polytechnic - (incorporating the erstwhile bastion of British student radicalism, Hornsey Art School) - set up a number of courses designed to intervene in the discourses dominating the interpretation and validation of 'visual culture'. Following the cataclysmic events of recent

⁵ JOHN TAGG, "Practising Theories: an Interview with Joanne Lukitsh", *Afterimage*, vol. 15, no.6, January 1988, p6-10, reprinted in *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field*, Macmillan, London, 1992, p78.

⁶ See Chapter 5 *Photoconceptualism*

years in the British artworld, a need was felt among many radical academics to examine visual culture more broadly. Ways had to be found to accommodate and analyse visual subcultures in the manner that critical theory had investigated high art. For participants in these academic manoeuvres, this was due to a radical, post-Arnoldian anthropological conception of culture as a 'whole way of life'. For participants in the subcultural trends of 1975-1980, however, this was entirely due to the need of cultural commissars to find new arenas to police following their 'discovery' of the total cultural and ethical bankruptcy of high art. The hierarchy operating within Middlesex is clear from Jon Bird's description of the MAs in 'Design History' and 'Visual Culture' being launched *specifically* as a mean of resisting "tendencies to reproduce the descriptive and historiographical categories of bourgeois art history."⁷ In 1979, Art Historians at Middlesex established *BLOCK*, "a manifestation of the cultural logic of a newly self-conscious, historicised and politicised initiative in the cultural realm; and simultaneous allergic reaction to the idealism of art history."⁸ Again, while this would seem benevolent, it arises in part from a need to keep up with culture as it is lived, not by living it, but by regulating it from a distance.

The idea that Middlesex was embarking upon a brave new path is questionable. As an academic institution, Middlesex was building upon successes elsewhere, most notably at the Birmingham CCCS. Yet, as a department of art history, Middlesex's most obvious predecessor was the department of Fine Art in Leeds, which had been at the nexus of Tim Clark's call to arms, establishing its MA in 'The Social History of Art' in 1975. By 1980, Clarkian forms of New Art History' seemed academically established.⁹ The Association of Art Historians imaginatively titled journal *Art History* tapped into the discussion at this moment by adding sections on 'new' historiographical methods. *The Oxford Art Journal*, established in 1978, also began to print an increasing number of materialist articles devoted to the circulation and reception of nineteenth-century art akin to Clark's project. Confirmation of a shift in the world of academic art history came with the launch of the Open University's BA in 'Modern Art and Modernism' in 1983, a course which remains entirely dominated by the new methodologies of the 1970s and 80s.¹⁰

⁷ JON BIRD, "On Newness, Art and History: Reviewing *BLOCK* 1979-1985" in A.L. REES & F. BORZELLO, *The New Art History*, Camden Press, 1986, p33. My emphasis.

⁸ *BLOCK*, "Introduction", *The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 1996, pxi. My emphasis.

⁹ "The 'new' art history differs from the old precisely in that it seeks to restore to art history the missing dimension of lived social relations; the expression 'new art history' therefore is another way of saying 'social history of art'. The social history of art is of course not new; what is new (or more correctly *was* new, ten or fifteen years ago) is the promise, or threat that the 'social history' approach might become the dominant one in university art departments." BURGIN, "Introduction: Something About Photography Theory", REES & BORZELLO, *The New Art History*, p41.

¹⁰ For a critique of the OU course in the history of modern art see SIMON WATNEY, "Modernist Studies: The Class of '83'", *Art History*, Volume 7, Number 1, p102-110.

The protagonists in these professed coup d'états have written much about this.¹¹ Rather than add to the glut of self-aggrandisement surrounding the 'triumph' of the New Art Histories, it might prove more engaging to sketch out the internecine dogfights of these punitively radical intellectual manoeuvres:

Rather than a tidy description of one trend, the new art history is a capacious and convenient title that sums up the impact of feminist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic and social-political ideas on a discipline notorious for its conservative taste in art and orthodoxy in research.¹²

While the numerous debates within this academic realm were posited on a highly complex, "fairly loosely formulated set of intentions and objectives",¹³ "there was a sense of a ragged consensuality and coherence of purpose".¹⁴ Hence, without suggesting that any single line of inquiry had pre-eminence, the fact that *BLOCK*

asked John Berger for a contribution demonstrates an intention of furthering the tradition of Marxist art history from Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser, Max Raphael, Meyer Shapiro, through to the publication in the mid-1970s of the work of T.J. Clark and Nicos Hadjinicolaou. The work of French and German theorists particularly as they were mediated through the debates on film and cultural theory in *Screen*, was important and *BLOCK* was dedicated to recognising and acclaiming work being done by contemporary political artists, an intention to which we remained impressively faithful, publishing examples of relevant art work.¹⁵

The first edition of *BLOCK* printed an "Editorial", emphasising the need to "address the problem of the social, economic and ideological dimensions of the arts in societies past and present"¹⁶ and an article by Terry Atkinson arguing about the relevance of materialism to the analysis of visual culture.¹⁷ Also included were illustrations of Tony Rickaby's, *Fascades* (1979) the controversial paintings which had been banned from the Arts Council's *Lives* exhibition

¹¹Open University Readers on Modern Art invariably reflect upon their own art historical methodology as part of their discussion of modern art. Conveniently, this makes it difficult to separate such forms of analysis from their object, thereby ensuring their legitimacy as critical tools for some time. For an account of the rise of social and feminist art history (at Leeds) which is reasonably independent of secondary historical tasks, see Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock's lengthy introduction to *Avant-Garde and Partisans Reviewed*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996.

¹²REES & BORZELLO, *The New Art History*, p2.

¹³ BIRD, "On Newness, Art and History", p32. See also BRANDON TAYLOR, "The New Art History?", *Art Monthly*, No.100.

¹⁴BLOCK, *The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture*, pxiii.

¹⁵Ibid., pxii.

¹⁶BLOCK, "Editorial", *BLOCK*, No.1, 1979, p1.

¹⁷TERRY ATKINSON, "Materialism, By Jove!", *BLOCK*, No.1, 1979, p34-38.

that year.¹⁸ This much was intended to signify *BLOCK*'s politicised commitment to the present state of the art. Jon Bird's "The Politics of Representation"¹⁹, printed the following year, however, was more obviously in tune with the interests of artists and critics inspired by *Screen* theory.²⁰ As such, this marks something of a break not only with the Clarkian tradition of social art history, but with *Studio International*, *Camera*work and *Ten 8*'s explicitly sociological concerns.

Among others, *BLOCK* provided a valuable forum for Burgin to present his challenge to the contestants in the Art Historical Games.²¹ Much in line with post-structuralist and post-Althusserian photographic historians such as Tagg, he argued that the

new art history has no consequences for the study of photography.²² ...the new art history being content simply to fill in the previously empty social space around the inherited 'masterpiece' with a glut of detail purporting to establish its 'determinations' in the (mainly economic) class relations of which art in general is seen as the more or less 'mediated' expression.²³

Although Burgin was certainly contributing to the then fashionable critique of the Nude, he held contemporary criticisms to be insubstantial: "the unswerving positivism of the new art history renders it incapable as was the idealism of the 'old' of examining the modes of constitution of its putative objects *within* its own discourses, and the positions (institutional, national, racial, sexual, etc.) from which these discourses are spoken."²⁴ Of course, materialist art historians such as Clark and Harrison were known for their work on (deliberately) established art historical categories (Courbet, Manet, Greenbergian Modernism). This, remained a bone of contention for *Screen* influenced critics who thought that such interests undermined the anthropological models of culture found in the writings of Barthes and Hall:

However valuable and influential Clark's approach has been, two elements missing or excluded from his work have been central to the direction *BLOCK* has taken over the last two years [1983-1985]. The first concerns the object of study. Whatever the displacements the social history of art has effected upon traditional art-historical

¹⁸TONY RICKABY, "Fascades", *BLOCK*, No.1, 1979, p48-49. See *GOD SAVE Conrad Atkinson*.

¹⁹*BLOCK*, No.2, 1980, p40-44.

²⁰*Screen* had taken up a radical agenda in the early 1970s, promoting ideas of the Russian Formalists, Brecht, the Frankfurt School and introducing semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Most notably, *Screen* introduced Althusser's structuralist Marxism to British cultural studies.

²¹ See BURGIN in TONY GODFREY, "Sex, Text, Politics: Interview with Victor Burgin", *Block*, No.7, 1982, p2-26.

²² BURGIN, "Introduction: Something About Photography Theory", p41.

²³*Ibid.* p42.

²⁴*Ibid.*

discourse, for the most part the body of works loosely representing the 'canon' has remained in situ.²⁵

The accusation here was that social art history was merely a way of polishing up the tarnished institutions of art, perhaps not ensuring not business-as-usual, but business with the hegemony of the traditional canon continued nonetheless. Hence, a second theoretical input into art-historical discourse had taken

analysis away from the realist paradigm towards questioning the epistemological strategies and values of representation itself. In relation to specific cultural forms, this approach stresses their intertextuality; that is, the traditional appeals to artistic intentionality, the determinants of style, or the psychologizing of the artistic subject, are displaced by an emphasis upon the diffuse play of meanings across the boundaries of individual works and specific biographies. Here the major theoretical influences have come from film studies and cultural analysis, particularly the application of psychoanalytic concepts of the discussion of visual pleasure and the interplay of meaning and desire in the work of the text upon the reader.²⁶

At the end of the 70s, educational photographers such as Spence had also become particularly drawn to such post-culturalist criticism.²⁷ Spence, nonetheless, was dissatisfied with purely analytical approaches:

I'm interested in striking at the same kind of mythologies as the post-structuralists are but coming at it from a completely different direction. So the virgin, the bride, the Madonna, Hollywood, are target areas of mine, but ultimately my work is concerned with saying to people 'you can do this unpicking for yourself'...²⁸

Towards the end of the 1970s, she took a number of steps towards ensuring that post-culturalist theory was satisfactorily fused with the *democratic practice* of community photography. In 1979 she enrolled on a BA Film and Photographic Arts degree at the School of Communication, Central London Polytechnic, where, in addition to being taught by Burgin, Spence was able to attend Mary Kelly's lectures in women's studies. This gave her a thorough theoretical groundwork from which to proceed with her own talks on 'Images of Women'.

²⁵ BIRD, "On Newness, Art and History", p33. Tom Gretton also disavowed art history any disciplinary adequacy "from which to write the history of ideology articulated by visual material." Instead he imagined "other image histories may have different and more radical potentials", TOM GRETTON, "New Lamps for Old" in REES & BORZELLO, *The New Art History*, p63-74.

²⁶ Ibid., p37.

²⁷ See JO SPENCE, "What Did You Do in the War Mummy?: Class and Gender in Images of Women", in T. DENNET, D. EVANS, S. GOHL, AND J. SPENCE, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, London, September 1979. Spence here adopts the techniques of the CCCS to study the *Picture Post*, a topic that by this stage was becoming canonical *within* the postculturalist milieu, being dealt with by critics such as Hall and Dick Hebdige.

²⁸ SPENCE quoted in JOHN ROBERTS, "Interview with Jo Spence", *Selected Errors: Writings on Art and Politics 1981-90*, Pluto Press, London, p140.

Also while at the CLP, Spence teamed up with Charlotte Pembrey, Jane Munro and Ann Kennedy to form the Polysnappers Collective.

The work involves what they term *didactic montage*, employing a variety of representational devices to engage in ways in which ‘the family’ has become viewed as the ‘natural’ way to live. In this work dolls are used in place of people to *avoid the problems of exploiting people as ‘camera fodder’*.²⁹



[Figure 8.1 Polysnappers Collective *Family, Fantasy, Photography*, (1979)]

The use of dummies was once instance in the effort to reform radical photographic practice, avoiding the dangers of appropriating the media’s forms. To an extent, this ensured that the possibility of understanding Spence’s work as a visual record of enlightenment was ruled out in favour of encouraging the viewer’s emancipatory actions.

In 1979, Spence co-edited the inaugural edition of the Photography Workshop’s new journal *Politics / Photography*.³⁰, following her expulsion from *Camera*work by the Half Moon Gallery for being “too theoretical”.³¹ From this point, Spence’s theoretical commitments shifted subtly away from the theoretical reductionism that had inflicted photoconceptualism since its inception:

Usually the woman’s ‘symbolic lack’ (of the phallus) and exclusion from the patriarchal order have been stressed [in much of the current work on women]; but I would like to ask if the concept of ‘woman as sign’ can also illuminate her place in the ‘symbolic order’ of capitalism? In other words I want to broaden the question of decoding images of woman to take into account not just the symbolic sexual lack, but also the exploitation of woman’s labour power under capitalism.³²

Spence was not regressing to a ‘vulgar materialism’ but to a particularising insistence that “...stereotypes are not *universal* but differ markedly depending on the context in which they are used, and the type of (class) audience.”³³

²⁹ LIZ WELLS, “The Words Say More than the Pictures: Jo Spence’s Work Reviewed”, *Camera*work, 32, Summer 1985, p26.

³⁰ DENNET, EVANS, GOHL, and SPENCE, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, 1979.

³¹ DENNET, EVANS, GOHL, and SPENCE, “A Statement from the Photography Workshop”, *Photography / Politics: One*, pII. Spence wrote only one essay for *Camera*work.

³² SPENCE, “What Did You Do in the War Mummy?” p30.

³³ *Ibid.*

This quest for a particularising form of practice found expression in Spence's major solo project *Beyond the Family Album* (1978-9): "Who pictures whom in family photography? Why do people not photograph family arguments, illness, failure, even just work? These are questions that, above all, Jo Spence has asked, in her attempt to model the family album..."³⁴

..we must find ways to demythologise *ourselves* (long before we attempt to demythologise others) so that we can begin to formulate different questions about our own identity [...] This would take the form of a radicalised type of 'amateurism'; what would amount to a total questioning and overthrow of the Kodak regime which dominates world markets, and fills our memories with visual banalities.³⁵

Spence's reworked Family Album revealed the relationship between the poses, images, and identities promoted by the 'Kodak regime', the mass media and those we believe we discover in our snapshots. However, they did not always explicitly question the concept of authenticity by playing out a kind of drama in which the clean lines between the posed and the authentic, the object and the subject, culture and self are deconstructed, opting for a more ideologically ambiguous autobiographical approach.

It was during this period that Spence began to develop the form of practice that she would later term 'photo-therapy', work in which the photographic image is used to explore personal history and conflicts.³⁶ For Spence, photo-therapy allowed her to tackle complex and radical ideas about women, the body, class, health and illness, drawing on her own experience - including that of breast cancer - following her strong conviction of the inseparability of the personal and the political:

...I have examined myself as a system of signification which can be recorded. This makes 'me' the *mediator* as well as the *subject* of the information. This work had enabled me to start to deconstruct my own 'image', and then to start the work of reconstruction within a wider understanding of theories of visual representation.³⁷

Spence's work now centred more firmly on 'herself' as a source of explorations, a fact celebrated by the majority of her critics.³⁸ In part, this obscured that fact that the

³⁴ TAGG, "Practising Theories", p90-91.

³⁵ SPENCE, "What is a Political Photograph", *Camera* 29, Winter 1983/84, p28.

³⁶ Phototherapy, developed with Rosy Martin, draws upon co-counselling conventions, yet flouted those conventions by making the work public. The most well known example of such work is *The Picture of Health* (1982-1991), Spence's major collaboration with Maggie Murray of Format Photographers and Yana Stajo.

³⁷ SPENCE, "What Did You Do in the War Mummy?", p30.

³⁸ "Spence's photography deals with the question of control at a number of levels. It is concerned with reclaiming control of the female body and formulating a visual language to represent difference. It is also about the politics of health care and how the individual can retain power when categorised as

phototherapy programme was supposed to be a transferable skill. There are now numerous practitioners of phototherapy whose work is equally valid (but not as economically valuable) as Spence's. The problem for Spence, perhaps, was that most critics tended to focus on *her* work rather than on her programme, reading her practice as though it were a traditional bourgeois gallery art. Hence, for Liz Wells, Spence's exploration of the politics of health care tipped "the emphasis of her work too far into the personal."³⁹ In *Property of Jo Spence*, photographed by Terry Dennet, the "proclamation of her breast as her property speaks strongly of fears of mastectomy, an operation performed all too frequently as a result of decisions taken by doctors whilst the patient herself is under anaesthetic. Spence took this particular photograph, which is part of the *Family Album* group, into hospital to remind herself that she 'had the right to refuse their treatment'."⁴⁰ As Wells suggests, *Property of Jo Spence* presents us with the presence of the body, asking us to reject the idea that patients are voiceless, presenceless non-stories. However, it is important to stress that Spence did not simply seek to represent the subject, as if it existed prior to the photograph; she did not imply that she, as a 'self-photographer', was created by discourse. Rather, she located the subject of her photographs in relation to discourses of identity and truth. For that reason, she did not understand autobiography to be any experientially truer than other representations of the self or to offer an identity any less constructed than that produced by other forms of representation. Although Spence retained tensions between different forms of representation, to a number of viewers the results appeared to be less a deconstruction of her 'own image', than an autobiographical document of her battle against breast cancer. This was a problem raised directly by Spence's measures to reform radical photographic practice by avoiding the dangers of appropriating the media's forms. Frank depictions of her mutilated body encouraged viewers to merge with the subject-matter of her photography (her unsuccessful attempt to reclaim control of her body both from cancer and medics), to understand her work emphatically rather than as a Burginian text designed to enlist the spectator in a writerly process of discovery. Although this runs counter to her analytical approach - which was directed against the notion of the artist as bearer of culture - it remains clear that to identify or merge with Spence's photography would be to negate her "right to refuse", to see 'her' only as *subject*, as opposed to "the *mediator* as well as the *subject* of the information."⁴¹ To continue to treat Spence's images analytically as espoused by Wells, however, is equally problematic.

passive patient or victim. And above all, Spence's work is about taking control of identity and of drawing attention to the complexity and fractured nature of our sense of self." LYNDIA NEAD, *Missing Persons/Damaged Lives*, Leeds City Art Galleries, Jackson Wilson Limited, Leeds, 1991, p1.

³⁹ LIZ WELLS, "The Words Say More than the Pictures: Jo Spence's Work Reviewed", *Camera Work*, 32, Summer 1985, p27.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ SPENCE, "What Did You Do in the War Mummy", p30.

Adopting an anti-authorial mode of analysis, viewers might view choose to counterpoise the encoding of Spence's body to the presumed sensuousness of the conventional female Nude. The problem with this mode of cognition is that it forces us to embrace as granted a pure/impure dichotomy. By confronting one half of the dichotomy with its opposite, Spence contests closure on the fixed category of the 'feminine' body, but does so within the dualistic tradition of Western metaphysics.

An equally concerted attempt to re-negotiate the critical bind of radical academicism was made by ex-A&L member Terry Atkinson. After his departure from A&L in 1974 over a dispute concerning *Index*, he produced a series of photo-text pieces entitled *The Bridging Works*. These combined historical images with satirical renditions of the *Index*.⁴² Given that "by 1973 the conceptualist photograph could be, as was becoming, integrated into the regime"⁴³ Atkinson consequently took up painting harsh, non-aestheticised images in a detached manner. Atkinson received a modicum of critical acclaim for the way in which his visible corrections rendered the surfaces of his paintings tactile, the joins between the different blocks remaining clearly visible, thereby revealing that painting is more than a transformation of 'reality', that our access to the world runs exclusively through such forms of representation. However, as Tagg pointed out, such deconstructive strategies were by no means significant manoeuvres in the de-aestheticisation of post-war painting.⁴⁴ If Atkinson was merely attempting to transgress painterly decorum, (if such a thing still existed in the 1970s), he failed to sufficiently differentiate his practice *formally* from that of his peers. Yet as Atkinson has suggested himself, the importance of the manufacture and physicality of his painted works should not be over-estimated:

Art as negation, the negating of established art moves, of which Minimalism was a strong example, has now a well founded attraction for the cultural administration. The culture industry has strong gravitation pull upon the negating, outer orbits, imploding them time and time again into the rebus of its central administration. This happens inevitably where the distinction between production and reproduction becomes blurred. [...] Adorno's nightmare of tyranny of method over material, which

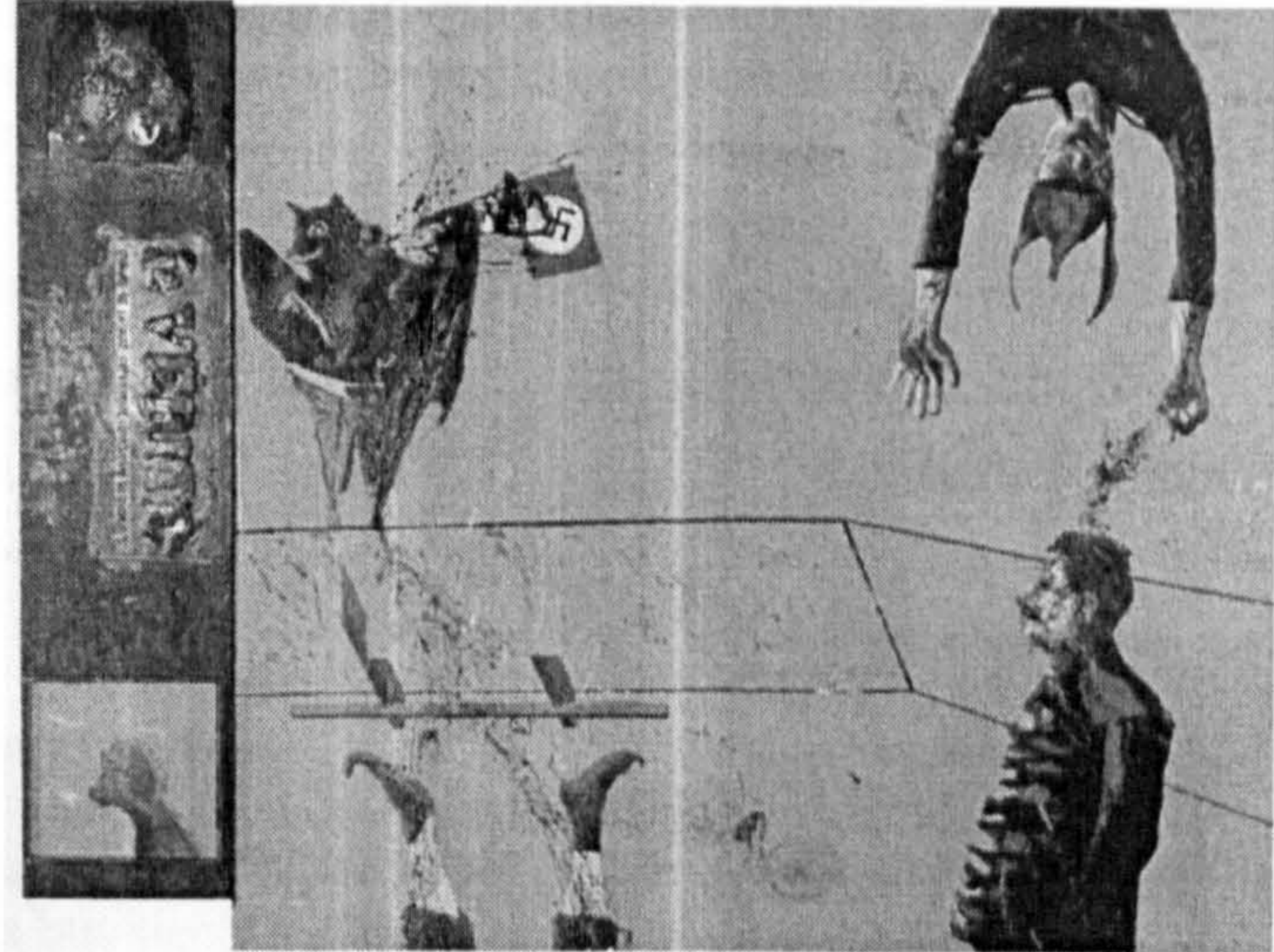
⁴² "Whilst I did feel some unease in using a photo-based practice since, in the end, the controversies, if that is what they were, of the prioritising of the text over some such as the pictorial, had not been taken lightly in A&L during the years 1966-1974, it still seemed to me the side-step necessarily involved some risk of historical incongruity - as it turned out photo-based practice was not historically incongruous enough, by 1974 it was too conceptually respectable. Hence the turn in starting to look for practices which Western avant-guardism would consider to be intellectually despicable and ideological death, such as Soviet Socialist Realism, and hence in late 1974 after *The Bridging Works*, starting to try to figure out the making of the World War I works." TERRY ATKINSON in JOHN ROBERTS ed., "Using Photographs circa 1974", *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, Camerawords, London, 1997, p73-4.

⁴³ Ibid., p77.

⁴⁴ "...he seems tempted by facile effects so that his indecision leaves us uncertain how or to what we should attend." TAGG, "Terry Atkinson: History - Drawing, Robert Self Gallery, London", *Art Monthly*, Number 4, February 1977, p20.

is something like and perhaps overlaps, Clark's "bad dream of modernism" (T.J. Clark, *Reconstructing Modernism*, Boston 1990).....⁴⁵

What was and remains of interest is the way in which Atkinson's works engaged with then current debates, and the way in which he provided some groundwork (albeit against his own wishes) for the serious critical reception of some performance-based painting of the mid 1980s (e.g. the paintings of Steven Campbell). Atkinson was instrumental amongst erstwhile British conceptual artists in closing the gap between the critical possibilities of painting and photography in the wake of the debates around representation, thereby reinvigorating second-order approaches to practice.⁴⁶



[Figure 8.2 Terry Atkinson *Ideologically Battered Postcard from Trotsky in Coyoacan to Stalin in Moscow, dated 1938...(1981-82)*]

For Atkinson, the fact that painting required a greater degree of manipulation than text or photographic based forms of practice, served only to emphasise these issues. As John Roberts has pointed out, Atkinson "sees his work as being linked inextricably to an historically accountable view of his own agency as an artist. The complex issue of producers being both *bearers* as well as producers of cultural values is central to this."⁴⁷

In an era before the arrival of the digital paint box would bring back the 'hand-made' back into the critical agenda, this was premonitory. On a formal level, then, Atkinson's paintings re-introduced an important yet almost entirely neglected component into the image-text work, that the image itself may be manipulated, in ways other than by its framing, its context, or by being accompanied by a written text. This 'discovery' in itself would have merely continued the narcissistic nature of semio-art. Atkinson, however, ensured that these formal concerns were allied to his concern with the ways in which human experience is

⁴⁵ ATKINSON, "Mutes", *Terry Atkinson: Mute 3 (Works After 1987)*, VestsjFllands Kustmuseum, Sorr; The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1989, p29.

⁴⁶ "T.J. Clark's historical project on nineteenth-century French painting is the most obvious and major contribution to this. His work on Courbet in the early 1970s is an attempt to draw painting back into a perspective which took painting to be *historically* linked to the claims of art's second-order critical status." ROBERTS, "Imaging History: The History Painting of Terry Atkinson", *Postmodernism, Politics and Art*, University of Manchester Press, March 1990, p127.

⁴⁷Ibid.

threatened or governed by the uncontrolled development of technology and the media, and by the increasingly rigid division of knowledge and roles against a background of political crisis and economic depression:

... the split between a disinterested and contemplative model of learning through art in late modernism and a conventionalised political one in social realism, *and* the critique of painting itself in the 1960s and 1970s continually undermined what painting was best at: history. Or rather, it undermined the understanding that certain pictures might stand in a position to generate historical knowledge discursively.⁴⁸

In recognition of this, Atkinson's paintings displayed a resistance of their subject matter to an inner ordering, postulating the absence of a foundation for composition, or what has subsequently been inappropriately packaged as 'awkward authenticity'. Atkinson's activity was registered through recognition that it was a form of 'acting':

Terry Actor - suggesting the artist as an agent of (some kind of) action, no matter how historically puny when placed in relation to such an event as Hiroshima. Also perhaps suggesting the artist as a theatrical and decorative figure unable to do very much about the relations of power themselves but highly visible on the ideological stage of those relations. The West, for example, exhibits a vanity in using the figure of the artist as a kind of cipher of the alleged virtue of self-expression.⁴⁹

In addition, there was a Brechtian form of recognition that literalist attempts to 'rectify' ideology, failed to produce the required 'alienation effect', since to "critically think and interrogate the notions of critical thinking and interrogative procedure", cannot be simply achieved as "this would undermine the structural and a priori assumptions which are critical thinking and interrogative procedure."⁵⁰ Profitable political and cultural 'intervention' had therefore to be considered as a form of theatre, a play within a play, while simultaneously of tremendous significance.

Just as A&L had reacted against Semio-Art in 1976, so Atkinson used painting to propose a deliberately 'absurd' practical riposte to the managerial discourse of the academic artworld, given that Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist inspired approaches were quickly becoming respectable. Painting *had* to be the chosen medium for Atkinson's project precisely because it was so unfashionable with the critical cognoscenti. By painting, he believed he could operate outwith the glare of the new art historians. This tactical decision proved to be particularly fortuitous given that the critical and financial foundations were then being laid for *The New Spirit in Painting*, to increasingly hysterical howls of derision from critical

⁴⁸ibid. p126.

⁴⁹ ATKINSON, "Mutes", p30.

⁵⁰Ibid. p29.

postmodernists.⁵¹ At the same time, however, Atkinson's paintings constituted a stylistic reaction to the sort of mechanically produced work being produced by artists such as A&L. Atkinson, however, did not paint with 'vigorous imagination'; indeed his paintings were almost entirely devoid of lyricism, executed in blunt and crude manner that made Bad Painting look virtuoso.

Despite the apparent visual similarities, Atkinson's practice was promoted by himself and by others by emphasising that he was resolutely opposed to the kinds of neo-expressionist work emerging from mainland Europe and the States in the run up to the art boom of the early 80s:

The strong moral streak persists among British artists, preventing a wholehearted flight into fantasy - so the imaginative excesses of New Image have not flowered here. [...] survival as a marginalized group - is too insistent to allow the 'suspension of disbelief' necessary to embrace the state of grace conjured up the New Image rag-bag of reference and symbols. Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, Fetting, Paladino *et al* offer a vision of universalised "man", a free spirit at one with wild nature, governed by his passions, fears and animalism.⁵²

On a formal level, Atkinson's paintings certainly differed radically from the provocatively frivolous paintings of the Italian Trans-Avantgardia since they were determinably neglected in a way which made them almost completely undesirable as fetishistic *object d'art*. There was a knowing dilettantism in the treatment of the image, the ways in which the quality and finish of the paint was suppressed. In this, however, it was difficult to see how Atkinson differed from neo-expressionist painters such as Julian Schnabel or Anselm Kiefer. Both Kiefer and Schnabel had achieved a significant degree of fame by including incongruous, perishable and unalluring objects in their tableaux style paintings, while painting in as impecunious a fashion as possible. Schnabel even took to painting on velvet in order to give his oil paint the texture and appearance of excrement.

To what extent, it should be asked, did Atkinson's paintings differ from the simplistic reaction of critical postmodernists? By painting ineffectively, Atkinson sought to ridicule what they perceived to be the machismo of Bad Painting and the allegedly spontaneous unconventionality of expressionist theories of painting. Used in bearing to what would soon be termed the New Image, this was the most false and banal of claims. As many involved in the production and promotion of the New Image phenomenon would have freely admitted, New Image painting was deliberately and emphatically *inauthentic*; it was, after all, Neo-Expressionist. Moreover, not only was Atkinson's 'critique' aimed at a non-existent straw man, it was thirty years late of its target. His anti-expressionism was entirely in keeping with the traditions of post-expressionist art which had dominated Modernist practices since the late

⁵¹See Chapter 10 *Nude Review* and Chapter 12 *Schooling London*.

⁵²SARAH KENT, "Critical Images", *Flash Art International*, March 1985, p24.

1950s (Neo-Dada, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism etc.) If anything, Atkinson should have been critical of this critical orthodoxy, which loved to continually debunk the artist as 'genius'. What failed to be addressed was the fact that competent critical judges were seen as geniuses themselves:

The history of modern art shows, according to Becker, that the purely logical implications of the institutional theory had to be abandoned in order to blunt the relativistic consequences of Dadaism. The argument was developed that while a snow shovel or a urinal can be eminent art objects - it is just a matter of managing the social context correctly - you have to be a genius to see it in the first place; this is essentially Danto's view of Warhol's supposedly colossal philosophical achievement. Art practice after the death of art seems to require a special talent to invent new games, new manipulations of the social context, perhaps laced with some insight or wit. Post-art cultural practitioners - Duchamp, Warhol, Johns, Beuys, Koons, Richter *et alia* - turn out to be pretty special people after all.⁵³

Atkinson's paintings, nonetheless, could be read as mediating on this very problematic, this being that "the absence of some intention for art, the once avant-gardist idea that 'If someone calls it Art, it's art ('Don Judd's Dictum') leaves the world very much as it was."⁵⁴ In opposition to this game, Atkinson called into his work historical events, the political implications of which have borne a significant impact upon our perceptions about the world: the First World War, the Russian Revolution, Stalinism, Trotsky, the Second World War, the war in Vietnam, North Ireland, nuclear warfare and the domestic surround. Atkinson attempted to deconstruct the conventional picture of the historical event as it has been reported by the media and the academic (anti)establishment.

While representing a concerted effort to reflect upon the complex interrelations between power and knowledge operating independently of individual artists, suggestions in the 1970s that a reactionary conspiracy by the CIA *alone* ensured the success of Abstract Expressionism for purely propagandist ends were vastly oversimplistic. Abstract Expressionism cannot simply be seen as the opposite force to Socialist Realism since "Socialist Realism did not [...] constitute a single unvarying doctrine and [...] never really constituted an exceptionless or monolithic style."⁵⁵ In recognition that such history is negotiable, Atkinson juggled Western European and Soviet definitions about socialism. By presenting mutually incompatible

⁵³ IAN HEYWOOD, "Art's World and the Social World", *Social Theories of Art: A Critique*, MacMillan Press, 1997, p21.

⁵⁴ HARRISON, "On 'A Portrait of V. I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock'", *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p139.

⁵⁵ MATTHEW CULLERNE BOWN and BRANDON TAYLOR, "Introduction", *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One Party State, 1917-1992*, Manchester University Press, 1993, p10. Following the postmodernist revision of Western art in the 70s and early 80s, and *glasnost* in the mid-1980s, books such as Igor Goomstock's *Totalitarian Art* (1990) and Christine Lindey's *Art in the Cold War* (1991) ended the critical embargo on the Soviet art of the post-1920s.

assertions, Atkinson hoped that neither view would be able to predominate, decentering Western Institutional avant-gardism by placing it in a permanent state of unrest/collusion with Soviet totalitarian art. In this, Atkinson was close to the punk appropriation of the swastika as part of its exhaustive intellectual vanguardist game. The bringing together of two ideologically incoherent world-views central to Atkinson's paintings provided the way in which A&L would later enter the area of the pictorial and introduce a *discursive* form of politics and history into their work, aiding the Hegelian argument that the creation of such contradiction was fundamental to the dialectics of heterogeneous cultural practices. In a way, then, Atkinson's history paintings of the 1970s, were inconspicuously symptomatic critiques of the unrecognised sociological posturing of post-Althusserian and Feminist Art Historians, who, in their obsession with hegemonic relations of dominance and subordination, could easily become the unwitting producers of similar forms of cultural exclusion.

CHAPTER 9

The New Humanistic Theories of Art

The new critic's relationship to the public is not unlike that of the anthropologist to a primitive tribe. Their only justifiable motivation must be the belief that the public, as a valid subculture, has a valid folk art which it creates and sustains but which is submerged and undervalued beneath the more sophisticated art strata that, with official backing, has tended to dominate the intelligentsia of the day.¹

...it is as insulting to maintain that people are only capable to enjoying escapist ladies with exotic purple faces as it is to ignore them by painting monochrome abstractions for the few who appreciate such inbred exercises.²

There is a tremendous hunger among the general public to find out about art. So, quite innocently, they go to the Royal Academy or the Tate Gallery because they assume that the work there 'must be good'. In the Tate Gallery, mixed up with the beautiful Rodin statues, they see bits of bent wire and tin cans dangling all over the place and come out totally bewildered. If it is in the Tate it must be good. In fact it is only in the Tate because the trustees and the Arts Council buy it with taxpayer's money and it is in there, and the public have precious little to say in the matter.³

People have turned up here, on the whole because they know that a lot is wrong with modern art and that a great deal needs to be done before it has any kind of organic relationship with the majority of the population of this country.⁴

...all this talk about 'moth-eaten modernism', the inadequacy of the Tate's purchasing policies, the desirability of populism, etc., etc., has been frequently voiced within your [*Art Monthly*] columns before. It came however, not from the 'New Right', from the orbit of Thatcherdom, but from the Far Left - and especially, of course, from Andrew Brighton. A peculiar 'consensus' appears to be emerging: on the basis of Johnson's article, it seems as if Norman St John-Stevs could easily employ Brighton to devise and run his arts policies for him, while he attended to his many other government duties. [...] Who is letting the side down and how. Or is it just that Andrew Brighton really does want some sort of post in the new government? Could someone explain what is going on?⁵

¹DAVID SWEET, "Artists v The Rest: The New Philistines", *Artscribe* 11, April 1978, p38. "...by 1969 a British painter in the New American manner, David Sweet, found himself in the paradoxical position of defending abstract works that would have been considered outrageous or incomprehensible in 1950 for their 'conservatism' against the radicals who had moved into minimalism and conceptual art." ROBERT HEWISON, "The Arts in Hard Times", *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75*, Methuen, London, 1986, p235.

²RICHARD CORK, "Art For Whom?", *Art For Whom?*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1978, p10.

³DAVID SHEPHERD, "The Tate Gallery" in ANDREW BRIGHTON AND LYNDIA, *Towards Another Picture: an Anthology of Artist's by Artists Working in Britain 1945-1977*, Midland Group Nottingham, 1977, p76.

⁴CORK, "The State of British Art, Session 4: Why Not Popular", *Studio International*, 1978, p117.

⁵C. SILVESTER RICHARSON, "Correspondence: Who's for Populism", *Art Monthly*, No. 28, 1979, p29-30.

Despite efforts by community photographers and feminists to encourage artists to reject the institutionalised artworld, the major battles over British art at the end of the 1970s continued to be conducted in relation to the official art supported by the Arts Council. Until 1980, Cork continued to support artists who maintained a critical stance in relation both to conventional notions of popular taste and to the capitalist system as a whole. To critics like Cork, however, Social Art was an experiment (in hypocrisy). If the work failed to gain public support, it would retain kudos by having been *oppositional*. Unfortunately, this quickly made its stance ostensibly no different from that of the much maligned conceptualist avant-garde. The oppositional aesthetic was something of a knee-jerk reaction to larger political and economic forces which were threatening the end the privileged status of producers and critics of high art, especially 'politically progressive' high artists and their supporters.

Fears of a monetarist privatisation (as opposed to deregulation) of the artworld were substantiated as early as 1976 when the Redcliffe-Maud report, *Support for the Arts in England and Wales*, encouraged local authorities to make further provision for the arts:

The report was an important step in introducing the principle of 'matching funds', whereby central support for the arts was made dependent on raising equivalent sums from others sources such as local government or business sponsorship. Private patronage was increasingly co-ordinated with the Association for Business sponsorship for the Arts, founded in 1976. ABSA estimated that such support grew from £600,000 in 1976 to £4 million in 1979 - and £25 million by 1986. But support for these developments was not unqualified. Some anticipated the trend towards more conservative programming in bodies supported by the ABSA, while others interpreted the principle of 'matching funds' as demonstrating that the arts were becoming a less important priority for central government than had been the case in the 1960s.⁶

In the emerging mercenary climate, modest community-based practices would not attract corporate sponsorship. On the one hand, big businesses needed spectacular exhibitions of blue-chip art with which to associate their corporate identities. On the other hand, in order to ensure value for money, the ABSA needed art to become popular. This meant pandering to 'the people's taste' while introducing the masses to their idea of 'high culture'.

At this point, populist crisis criticism of the existing State arts institutions began to take a rather different path to that forged by Cork. At the end of 1977, clarification of a shift towards what *seemed* a business-friendly safe-option appeared to emerge in the form of Andrew Brighton and Lynda Morris' relativist exhibition *Towards Another Picture*, (Nottingham Castle 10th December 1977 - 26th January 1978). Brighton had got the idea for the exhibition from his varied experience of the different facets of the artworld: as a student at the conservative Royal Academy Schools, as a sales assistant in a popular print shop, and as a research student at the Royal College of Art (where he investigated the divisions between high and low 'fine art'). As a means of blurring these distinctions, the exhibition was hung thematically with sections devoted to war, landscape, various human activities (pastoral,

⁶BART MOORE-GILBERT, "Cultural Closure or Post-Avantgardism", *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural*

sporting and industrial), and several groupings of abstract paintings hung according to subject matter. Notable inclusions in the exhibition were the works of academic and populist painters such as Terence Cuneo who depicted Lord Mayors and steam trains, and David Shepherd, who specialised in steam trains and African wildlife - especially elephants.⁷ To ignore such popular prints, Brighton and Morris proposed, was to distort the history of Western art by excluding works which the vast majority of Britons held to be precious examples of fine art. In this, Brighton and Morris were far from reactionary.

While the 'social functionalism' promoted by Cork was particularly amenable to the control and committee procedures favoured by the Arts Council, Brighton and Morris' selection was vigorously resisted by the artworld's managerial sectors who saw it as a threat to the premises upon which they staked their reputations. Greenberg, Adorno, Benjamin, Gasset etc. had proposed distinctions between avant-garde and kitsch that favoured and promoted the former. What physical factors sustained such distinctions? What would happen if avant-garde and kitsch art forms shared the same environment? Could viewers identify important art by its morphological properties? Was form radical? Torn from their usual context, forced to share the same room, all the exhibits looked uneasy. What was the visitor to make of them? If Andre made a last ditch attempt at re-defining the production of 'avant-garde' art economically, by nourishing class divisions, Brighton and Morris discredited the theatre in which such divisions might take place, leaving it up to visitors to produce their own explanations of *who* can confer art status on *what* and *when*. In this *Towards Another Picture* successfully demonstrated that culture is the product of contradictory and contestory ideologies, leaving the problems as unresolved as they are in practice.

'Crisis Critics', this was a phrase of Peter Fuller's we went along with. For my part, it never sang to my way of seeing at that time. Having been taught by old academicians, middle-aged neo-romantics, John Latham and encountered Caro's Greenbergianism as well as the out-of-art school uses of art, uncertainty seemed endemic to art. However, in retrospect Fuller's phrase did have some validity. The presuppositions of older artists and cultural mandarins were in some degree of crisis induced by the rise of conceptualism and Feminism, Marxism, etc. Our conference [*State of British Art*] tried to touch on all these areas. The strategy was one that I advocated in *Towards Another Picture*. Lay out the conflicting arguments, show the conflict and thus promote crises, propagate uncertainty and undermine the foundations of the professional orthodoxy then enshrined in the Arts Council and the Tate gallery, etc. Maybe Peter was looking for a new way out of crises into Bergerian aesthetics, I just loved the mess.⁸

Closure?, Routledge, London, 1994, p14.

⁷"My training was to follow the tradition of the past, when pupils were apprenticed to the great masters. The students then went through the mill, learning the hard way, which is always the best." SHEPHERD, "My apprenticeship and art schools", *Towards Another Picture: An anthology of writings by artists working in Britain 1945-77* edited by Andrew Brighton and Lynda Morris, Midland Group Nottingham, 1977, p5.

⁸Email from BRIGHTON, @Tate Gallery, Friday 20th February 1998.

The exhibition was also important in that it opened up this ‘mess’, the unwritten histories of art. For example, were there not important distinctions and hierarchies to be observed *within* the popular print world? Cuneo had trained as an illustrator, and in the 1950s was famous for his illustrations of trains in Boy’s comics. During this period he also painted official Royal portraits and numerous commemorative propaganda-on-canvas of public or state events. By the 1970s, however, his original works were mainly collected by toy train enthusiasts, although remained popular in poster formats printed and sold through independent companies following his death. In contrast, ex-Stowe boy Shepherd did not come to popular painting by way of illustration but by producing framed paintings for sale at small London Galleries and the Open Air Show at the Victoria Embankment Gardens in the early 1950s. Following rejection by the Slade, he trained under ex-Slade Student Robin Goodwin, “learning the hard way, which is always the best.”⁹

Just because someone is fortunate enough to be creative, whether in architecture, music, painting or writing, there is no excuse for laziness - the harder you work the faster you will get to the top.¹⁰

Supported by his father (sic), Shepherd was able to avoid designing posters for advertising agencies. Following a stint painting aircraft at London Airport, his *Service by Night*, depicting the Kings Cross to Aberdeen sleeper, was made into an advertising poster by British Rail. Significantly, Shepherd begun his train paintings at the end of the steam age: “... it is the older locomotives, aeroplanes, and ships which excite me. They have so much more character than their more functional counterparts. And they evoke the qualities of romance and nostalgia.”¹¹ Shepherd’s romanticism caused him to take liberties with fact; inaccuracies emerged with signalling, one train seemed to emerge from the milk-yard at Kings Cross! It is for this reason that toy train enthusiasts never sought Shepherd’s work; it was inauthentically nostalgic rather than authentically retrograde. “For part of the regret the train paintings evoke is for an invented past when the British working class was an industrious set of craftsmen taking pride in their work uncorrupted by the boredom of diesel engines and trade union militancy. I suspect these are Shepherd’s best paintings.”¹² Indeed, it was precisely these qualities that appealed to the working class public who wanted to appropriate such an aura for their

⁹ SHEPHERD, “Art Training and London Adventures”, *The Man Who Loves Giants*, David & Charles, London, 1975, p22.

¹⁰ Ibid. p23.

¹¹ Ibid. p79.

¹² BRIGHTON, “Books: The New Humanism and The Man Who Loves Giants”, *Studio International*, July/August 1976, Performance Issue, p94.

fireplace walls.¹³ The elephant painting, *Lords of the Jungle* was published *en masse* in 1963, followed by *Wise Old Elephant*, *Winter and Plough Elephants at Amboseli*, all achieving vast sales through Boots the Chemist.

I wanted and needed to become known to a wide public and when the prints reached the 'top ten', as did those mentioned, this meant a very wide public indeed. The prints are run off in their thousands and can be seen in every branch of Boots and other chain stores. Anyone who is in the art business purely for money, and is doing it on a royalty basis, can make a fortune and unashamedly retire for a long time. One can think of a number of cases where an artist has thus ruined his reputation so much that his work is no longer wanted. But this was foreign to my way of thinking. First, I wanted my work to be sought after for as long as I lived. And I was not being paid on a royalty basis anyway. I began to see the red light when at least two of my pictures were judged top of all the prints for a particular year. I even ousted poor old Constable with his 'Haywain' and Canaletto with his famous pictures of Venice - all hardy perennials.¹⁴

Thus, in order to ensure his status as a 'fine artist', Shepherd's paintings were no longer sold as mere 'posters' but as 'paint-effect' prints on canvas.¹⁵ "So profoundly anti-democratic is British culture that even our popular painters are not populists."¹⁶ Limited editions of 850 signed and numbered prints were available for around £100 each.¹⁷ Almost every edition was bought out before being published. Of course, Shepherd could have become one of the world's wealthiest artists simply by embracing the vast market for his elephant paintings, and ruthlessly exploiting it by setting up his own distribution company.

It was tempting. I had children at expensive schools. But at this stage of my life, when clients were willing to wait many months for my originals, I knew that if I allowed further work to be churned out in unlimited numbers, whatever the quality, I would very quickly damage the demand for my original paintings. If I stayed at Boots the Chemists, I might make a quick and considerable financial killing, but after a few years, my work would probably be worthless. This was not my idea of being a

¹³Witness Shepherd's *Lords of the Jungle* reproduction on Derrick Trotter's living room in early series of the BBC's *Only Fools and Horses*.

¹⁴ SHEPHERD, *The Man Who Loves Giants*, p73.

¹⁵Another attraction was the mimetic quality of Shepherd's art, the fact that it 'looked like a photograph.' Technically speaking, Shepherd was a poorer illustrator than Cuneo, being more prone to reject the rigid conventions of engineering illustration which requires that scale be constantly considered. Shepherd's willingness to deviate from convention may have marked out his pictures as more expressive, painterly, more 'art-like', but in doing so, he often found it difficult to handle simple matters of perspective. Poor handling of the illusion of pictorial depth did not deter people from purchasing Shepherd's work, not perhaps because they were unable to see the flaws in his work, but because they were mainly interested in the subject matter.

¹⁶ BRIGHTON, "Books: The New Humanism and The Man Who Loves Giants", p95.

¹⁷This was the issue price in 1973.

professional artist - art meant a great deal more than money.¹⁸

This 'gamble' paid off financially. Since the early 1970s, every Shepherd exhibition has sold out in the opening night, many paintings are even drawn by ballot. For Shepherd, diversification in subject matter did not occur solely on commercial grounds.¹⁹ The elephant pictures were produced, since like the steam train, they were giants in threat of extinction. That this 'thematic' concern marked Shepherd out as an 'artist' was, again, much to his benefit. He was frequently in demand from television companies as a media friendly artist, a personality who could speak about popular subjects such as trains and wildlife in relation to his art. This was not the result of unrestrained Warholian business acumen, Shepherd was a 'sincere' business artist who used his position to raise substantial funds for the World Wildlife Fund. In 1973, 850 copies of his *Tiger Fire*, sold at £150 each, raised £127,500 for the WWF's 'Operation Tiger'.

Figure 9.1 David Shepherd *Tiger Fire*, Oil on Canvas. Reproduced as an edition of 850 prints in 1973.



Shepherd also spent much of his fortune restoring and running his beloved old steam trains. In 1967 he purchased a British Rail

Standard Class 4 steam train for £2,800 and a 9F for £3,000, the proceeds from an exhibition of elephant paintings held in New York. Since opening in June 1975, Shepherd's East Somerset Railway²⁰ (running from Cranmore to Ilfracombe) has, in turn, raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for the World Wildlife Fund.

Despite the ideological contradiction between environmentalism and Shepherd's carbon-monoxide fetishism, Shepherd and the WWF continue to raise funds for one another.²¹ Shepherd's undoubted generosity to endangered wild animals has masked his readiness to exploit the aesthetic impotence of the British, while relinquishing on his duty to

¹⁸ SHEPHERD, *The Man Who Loves Giants*, p74.

¹⁹ "...while David Shepherd could reject the idea of the specialness of the artist, he could not reject the specialness of art; it meant 'more than money'. To reject the specialness of art would be to endanger its value and status (financial and 'artistic'): for the claim for the specialness of art is indissolubly part of the marketing of art." BRIGHTON and NICHOLAS M. PEARSON, "The 'Specialness' of Art and Artists", *Art Monthly*, Number 21, November 1978, p4.

²⁰ Registered as a charity.

²¹ In 1984 the David Shepherd Conservation Fund was established, and has raised over £2.5 million to date.

return their honour as a taxpaying citizen:

I am a compulsive painter and have to paint every day; but no one wants to paint all the time for the benefit of the government via taxation, so it is simply a case of diverting the proceeds in another direction. It is infinitely more satisfying to donate the painting to the World Wildlife Fund, so that the rhinos or the tigers are the ones that benefit.²²

As Brighton commented:

Relative to his concern for animals Shepherd seems to be indifferent to the fate of man in these countries. This may stem from the manly common-sense ethic, his notion of personal authenticity, that leads him to hold in contempt bohemian artists, the Tate Gallery's modern collection and art schools: 'the world does not owe someone a living just because he is an artist.' This is the kind of right-wing individualism that at its worst can be brutally indifferent to human suffering and at its best be a humorous stoicism. [...] It has recently been promoted by Margaret Thatcher, who must be aware that it is an irrelevant fantasy in the age of monopoly capitalism.²³

Following the rise in popularity of Pop, Impressionist and Post-Impressionist prints in the early 80s Shepherd's stranglehold on the art print market began to wane. Despite his desire to be received as a 'professional artist' rather than a populist, Shepherd provided the groundwork for millions of unscrupulous imitators, the most notorious being perhaps the Franklin Mint who produce expensive 'collectors' tat relating to everything from McDonalds to Star Trek.

It is enlightening to consider Brighton and Morris' claims alongside *The Burlington Magazine's* attack on the Tate's purchasing policy *qua* Andre's 'Bricks':

...if they really intended to show what is being created in the 1970's, in all its variety, the Tate should be looking just as hard at painters working in a more academic tradition, like Seago or Cuneo, whose work is very popular, as at the latest *avant garde* productions. But then the Tate never had the slightest intention of doing full justice, in an almost sociological way, to the variety and range of 'art' in our time.²⁴

By stressing the show's 'grass-roots appeal' with precisely such inclusions, the organisers of *Towards Another Picture* were plainly attempting to claim a non-art world audience and thereby create a radical alternative to the Tate Gallery and Arts Council perspective on British art:

...art history, properly practised, is part of cultural history. The task of those constructing a history of own times is to examine and understand the uses of art in our culture, not to reinforce the evaluation of one section of the art market by giving

²² SHEPHERD, *The Man Who Loves Giants*, p105.

²³ BRIGHTON, "Books: The New Humanism and The Man Who Loves Giants", p95.

²⁴ BENEDICT NICOLSON, "Editorial: T1534, Untitled 1966", *The Burlington Magazine*, No. 877, Vol.. CXVIII, April 1976, p187-188.

them doubtful historical lineage.²⁵

In some ways the anthology which accompanied the exhibition achieved this aim, promoting recognition that there is a distinction to be observed between art's histories and an art historical text. Producing the anthology involved collecting and selecting statements relating to some of the practices and debates which took place in Britain since the 1950s, a period that played host to a plethora of artistic and anti-art movements. Given the omnidirectional nature of the period concerned, these statements took numerous forms.²⁶ The object of this anthology then was *not* to examine stylistic shifts, nor was it to provide a monolithic theoretical justification for practice, but to allow open consideration of the indeterminate relationships between institutions and practical/theoretical change in the artworld. Brighton and Morris illustrated the difficulty of writing critical accounts of recent work by refusing to write, thereby allowing viewers to make up their own mind. By attempting to erode the independent critic concept, they aimed to foster the recognition that ideology constructs art histories that may be 'other' to producers such as artists and critics. As a text which combined several contradictory possibilities at once, *Towards Another Picture* reminds us that the making of history involves a suppression of possibilities. By presenting the different ways in which artists aimed to interpellate viewers, other artists, institutions and critical texts, the anthology gave some scope for re-interpreting the recent past without adopting the pretence that issues posed by art history are capable of resolution:

While diagnostic in intention, this anthology is only portentous with regard to its title. Its editors felt a need to bridge the autistic hiatus that was appearing between the serried artistic ranks and the similarly serried files of orthodoxy.... [...] ...the work should be bracketed as an open verdict and thereby allow full criticism to run as the final, unwritten chapter.²⁷

This is not to say that no editorial policy was in place. The political impetus of late 70s art clearly dictated the manner in which artists' statements were arranged by 'issues' rather than movements. However, the book was "itself 'self-referential' and 'self-generating' by its very

²⁵ BRIGHTON, "Very British Triviality [reply to John McEwen]", *Art Monthly* Number 16, May 1978, p20.

²⁶ The Tate claimed to have recognised this factor: "In fact, there are no particular views which are held by the 'art world' as a whole, which at any time in its continual evolution manifests multiple, diverse and often contradictory opinions. And since there is no such view it follows that the Tate can in no respect be underpinned by it. The Gallery is, however, much influenced and affected by a whole range of often divergent opinions variously held within the art world." NORMAN REID, "The Tate Replies", *Studio International*, Volume 193, Number 987, 3/1977, p221. Reid was, to some extent, prophetic. Brighton is now Head of Public Events at the Tate in Millbank!

²⁷ KEVIN O'SHEA, "Book Review: Towards Another Picture", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, Volume 19, 1979, p188.

nature - an inescapable irony of orthodoxy!"²⁸ Contained within the visual-theoretical impact of *Towards Another Picture*, then, were the seeds of postmodernist detachment and appropriational irony. An exhibition without frontiers.²⁹

In 1978, the overall reception of the exhibition, however, was not favourable. It was not accepted that placing populist and academic works alongside that of the international avant-garde was enough to position the museum institution under scrutiny and attack the "intellectual vacuity, indolence, corruption and self-perpetuating mediocrity of the artworld".³⁰ Brighton was not helped by the fact that many of his intentions appeared virtually inseparable from Cork's Williamsian/democratic-socialist line.³¹ To his friend Peter Fuller, this endeavour was inadequate since it failed to recognise that institutionalised art was an *entirely redundant* form of culture:

Some critics are advocating a solution involving purchases over a wide range of art, including more academicist survivals. But this too, would be to institutionalise the marginal, to stake the hope for the survival of a modern art museum on the persistence of conventions which arose within the hegemonic tutelage of the 19th-century bourgeoisie. Buying a few more academic works would no more provide the artist with a social function than it would allow the present debacle to continue.³²

Hence, while Brighton and Morris may have managed to place the power of the British arts Quango under some threat, it was *inevitable* that they would fail to fulfil their offer of the kind of artworld structure which, as Cork put it, would have an "organic relationship with the majority of the population of this country", since the structures of the official art world were designed to suppress (to the State *and* the public) the fact that art no longer had any worthwhile function. *Towards Another Picture* could be said to have contributed to this

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹"I would have a problem with describing myself as a postmodernist because I thought that all that postmodernism was in a sense was, in a sense, an extension of modernism. My objection to them was that they were historicists, they would evaluate what was valuable in the present in terms of the past." Interview with BRIGHTON, Tate Gallery, London, February 1998.

³⁰ BRIGHTON, interview with ADRIAN SEARLE, Review: "Towards Another Picture", *Artscribe* No. 10, January 1978, p48.

³¹ The following statements would appear to corroborate this view: "While the visiting public does confer status on the gallery as a whole, it is not an effectual public for particular works; and even if a section of the public comes to understand and accept the ostensible values upon which the gallery proceeds, they will play no part in the creation of those values or the decisions that flow from them." BRIGHTON, "Official Art and the Tate Gallery", *Studio International*, No .1, 1977 , p 43. "[Genuine pluralism] only becomes central when art critics, art historians, the institutions of art, actually present the people of this country with the art culture they have really lived with, rather than a pale reflection of the international art market." BRIGHTON, "Why Not Popular", *Studio International*, Volume 194, Number 989, 2/1978, p21.

³² FULLER, "The Tate, The State and the English Tradition", *Studio International*, Volume 194, Number 988, 1/1978, p16.

illusion, focusing debate around the 'quality' of the works as physical art objects, rather than around their ideological functions. Reviewing the show for *Artscribe*, Adrian Searle commented,

What kind of critic nods silent approval at it *all*, as though there were good in everything, and he would not change it? One will have to make do with supposition, and guess that the art which Andrew Brighton might prefer would be the so-called 'popular' or 'traditional' art of Cuneo, Shepherd and Seago. [...] Curiously enough, the market which supports these fellows is the most riddled with corruption, carries the greatest burden of self-perpetuating mediocrity, is the most intellectually vacuous, inborn and inbred, and is fostered nurtured and developed to snare the punters. [...] Popular art does not attempt difficult problems like complex feelings or plastic form. It depicts things we already know in familiar ways. Therein lies its popularity.³³

In this, Searle mimicked the official line of the Tate Gallery:

...the Gallery considers its main takes to be the acquisition of a range of work, sufficient to demonstrate, through examples of high quality, those *distinctive* tendencies favoured by the Director and Trustees in the periods for which the Tate has responsibility, including the present. Money being short, this tends in practice to exclude artists whose work stays within highly traditional concerns without adding anything particularly distinctive, however technically accomplished their work may be. Whether people like Andre's work or not, few can deny that its role in the development of art is more important than that of a Seago or a Cuneo.³⁴..Andre's concern with greatly reducing the degree of art's traditional interference with things as they are, with revealing aspects of the world as it is. This attitude has had much influence on younger artists.....³⁵

In prefiguring the allegations made by Walker during the debate at the ICA *The State of British Art* conference, Searle was arguing that the kind of critical culture sought by the crisis critics was impossible since, in the present political circumstances, the very concept of an educated culture implied limits on accessibility. For Brighton, however, the issues were more cut and dry:

One way of seeing the Conference was as a debate between the socialist and liberal views of the state of British art. The left's arguments were based on the assumption that art cannot be seen as an activity divorced from the economic, political and ideological facts of our time. [...] The liberals argued that art is essentially an autonomous activity, primarily concerned with the pursuit of aesthetic excellence and conducted within the light of the 'mainstream' of the past. [...] [For example] James Faure Walker held up Anthony Hopkin's elucidation of music on the BBC as a model of criticism. John Tagg replied that criticism should not be concerned to promote another step in the march of modernism, rather it should question the unilinear

³³ SEARLE, Review: "Towards Another Picture", p48.

³⁴RICHARD MORPHET, "Carl Andre's Bricks", *The Burlington Magazine*, Volume CXVIII, No.884, November 1976, p764.

³⁵Ibid., p763.

account of twentieth-century art.³⁶

According to Searle, however, such a level of debate was not realised during the course of the conference:

Modernism was seen as a homogenous body of work, the result of a single, unexplained, but constantly reviled philosophy, and differences and dissent within it amounted to no more than mere pedantry in comparison to its overall character and state - all this consistently acted against *any* discussion of particular works, artists, successes or gains. [...] Throughout the weekend critics like Fuller, Brighton, Cork, Tisdall and Tagg attempted to characterise the stance of artists who might be seen to represent 'Modernism' in such a way that their position was seen to be untenable before they had a chance to reply.³⁷

Brighton certainly seemed to confuse the issues by oversimplification: "Not only is his reduction of 'visual ideology' to socio-economic classes itself an example of 'vulgar Marxism', but implicit ... is the treatment of art as an inert object upon which to visit a methodology."³⁸ He refused to recognise an old-chestnuts, namely, how might the public question the "unilinear account of twentieth-century art" without first having learned of it through the form of paternalistic education praised by Walker and the Arts Council? With this question in mind, *Towards Another Picture*, like Cork's *Art For Whom* and *Art For Society*, appears as a well-intentioned, yet dangerously ill-considered exercise in the politicking, patronising, unreconstructed class reductionism of 'vulgar' Marxism. Indeed, given that Left-wing populism=monetarism provided the political and aesthetic foundations for Thatcherism, Cork's later protestations against the Selsdon Group appear highly naive, if not hypocritical:

It is certainly true that modernism can only be wholly transformed if the society which produces it is transformed as well through the democratic process. But to conclude that nothing can be done in current conditions leads to a fatalist acceptance which merely boosts the position of the reactionary classes. Take, for instance, the revelations of extreme Conservative thinking in a 1978 report by the Selsdon Group. The paper called unequivocally for the abolition of government subsidies for the arts, and its replacement by the patronage of the middle-income society that would result from a general lowering of taxes. 'Art has always been the ultimate form of spending for the rich' declared the report, barefacedly approving of this tradition; 'there is every reason to believe that in a society where there are very many well-off people rather than a few rich, a richer artistic and cultural life would develop.' In other words, extend the old system of aristocratic and mercantile patronage by bolstering the bourgeoisie, and the rest of society can go to the wall.³⁹

³⁶ BRIGHTON "Artnotes", *Art Monthly*, No. 15, 1978, p32.

³⁷ SEARLE, "The State of the Art Debate at the ICA", *Artscribe* 11, April 1978, p39.

³⁸ BRIGHTON, "Book Review: Nicos Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle*", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, Volume 19, 1979, p184. Brighton rebukes Hadjinicolaou for something very similar to his own crimes.

³⁹ CORK, "Collaboration without Compromise", *Studio International*, (Art Galleries and Alternative Spaces) Vol. 195, No.990 1/1980, p9-10.

In other words, extend the old system of intellectual patronage and bolster the New Class by promulgating a crisis in art, and the rest of artworld can go to the wall?⁴⁰

Spending much of the late 1970s working at Goldsmiths College on the Gulbenkian Foundation's *Enquiry into the Economic Situation of the Visual Artist*, Brighton never managed to retain the high profile of his friend Fuller. *Towards Another Picture* and *The State of British Art* nonetheless encouraged the British Arts Council to commission another relativist exhibition. In 1979 they asked Derek Boshier to curate *Lives: An Exhibition of Artists Whose Work is Based on Other People's Lives*, an exhibition which received notoriety by banning the work of Conrad Atkinson and Tony Rickaby.

Figure 9.2 Barney Bubbles *Lives*, (1979).



Despite bringing some form of critical success for Atkinson, this Arts Council scandal unfortunately overshadowed Boshier's highly contentious curatorial stance. In his introduction, Boshier (a leading pop artist in the early 1960s) followed Ron Kitaj and David Hockney's lead explaining that he had intended to mount a populist exhibition "concerning or open to all or any people." Since everyone can relate to images of other people without the need for specialist art-historical knowledge, he argued, an exhibition with figurative-humanist content was bound to be popular.

If Brighton and Morris courted controversy with the shrewd juxtaposition of Cuneo and Shepherd, Boshier deliberately enraged the cognoscenti with his inclusion of Norman Hepple's work. Hepple, educated at Goldsmiths and the Royal Academy Schools, was a former war artist to the fire service and painter of many Royal portraits. His paintings parallel the spectacular Fascist art of the Third Reich; as he put it: "the illiterate can be moved by the poetry and magic of pictures."⁴¹



Figure 9.3 Norman Hepple in his Studio

⁴⁰"...their liberalism [Brighton, Cork, Fuller and Tagg] makes them a dangerous and absolute threat to artists in this country. The purpose of their efforts is manifestly to replace the present artistic bureaucracy by themselves and to administer patronage and influence (for whom? Society? or the members of their coterie?)" RALF RUMNEY, "Cultural Revolution or Art for Social Democracy?", *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p21.

⁴¹NORMAN HEPPLER, "Norman Hepple", in DEREK BOSHIER, "Statement", *Lives: An Exhibition of*

There are no limits to the possible refinements of the work. In the old painters lies an endless field of inspiration. And most important of all one is outside that awful world of art politics. The portrait will always have to be real and like; it is the last and final refuge of skill, that almost extinct painter's virtue.⁴²

Surely such art was more in need of critique than promotion? Was Boshier being satirical with the penultimate line in Hepple's potted biography: "Spends winter in Spain painting landscape and the peasants"? Perhaps not.⁴³ The real criticism was not intended to come from Boshier himself, but from the other exhibits. Included alongside Hepple's reactionary drudgery was Margaret Harrison's *Rape* (1978) [Figure 9.4]. Harrison's text for the catalogue made interesting reading:

...I have rediscovered a place for the use of craft of painting, a technique which was my main preoccupation as a student (having been trained at the Royal Academy Schools during the 60's) but for the last 7 or 8 years I had found it an inappropriate medium for the material on which I was working. I had utilised documentary techniques in order to examine issues concerning the lives of women. [...] When considering many current attitudes to women one realises that the European painting tradition has much to do with the confirmation of those attitudes, advertising has taken on the role previously occupied by painting i.e. that of the depiction of women as objects.



Thus Harrison's Bergerian appropriational painting stood in ideological opposition to Hepple's jingoistic canvases, despite the fact that they were both trained at the conservative RA Schools. In this, Harrison opened up painting as a possibility for feminist artists who had previously been preoccupied with the scripto-visual mode. Its inclusion in *Lives*, however, returned visitors to the question of form raised by *Towards Another Picture*: how, precisely, could the viewer distinguish Harrison's illusionism from Hepple's? Was form now something to be circumvented entirely in the consideration of art? If so, how was it possible for Harrison's use of the 'European painting tradition' to carry any critical weight? Placed under such scrutiny, the 'avant-garde' assumption that anti-aesthetics guaranteed criticality appeared waning.

Artists Whose Work is Based on Other Peoples' Lives, Selected by Derek Boshier, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979.

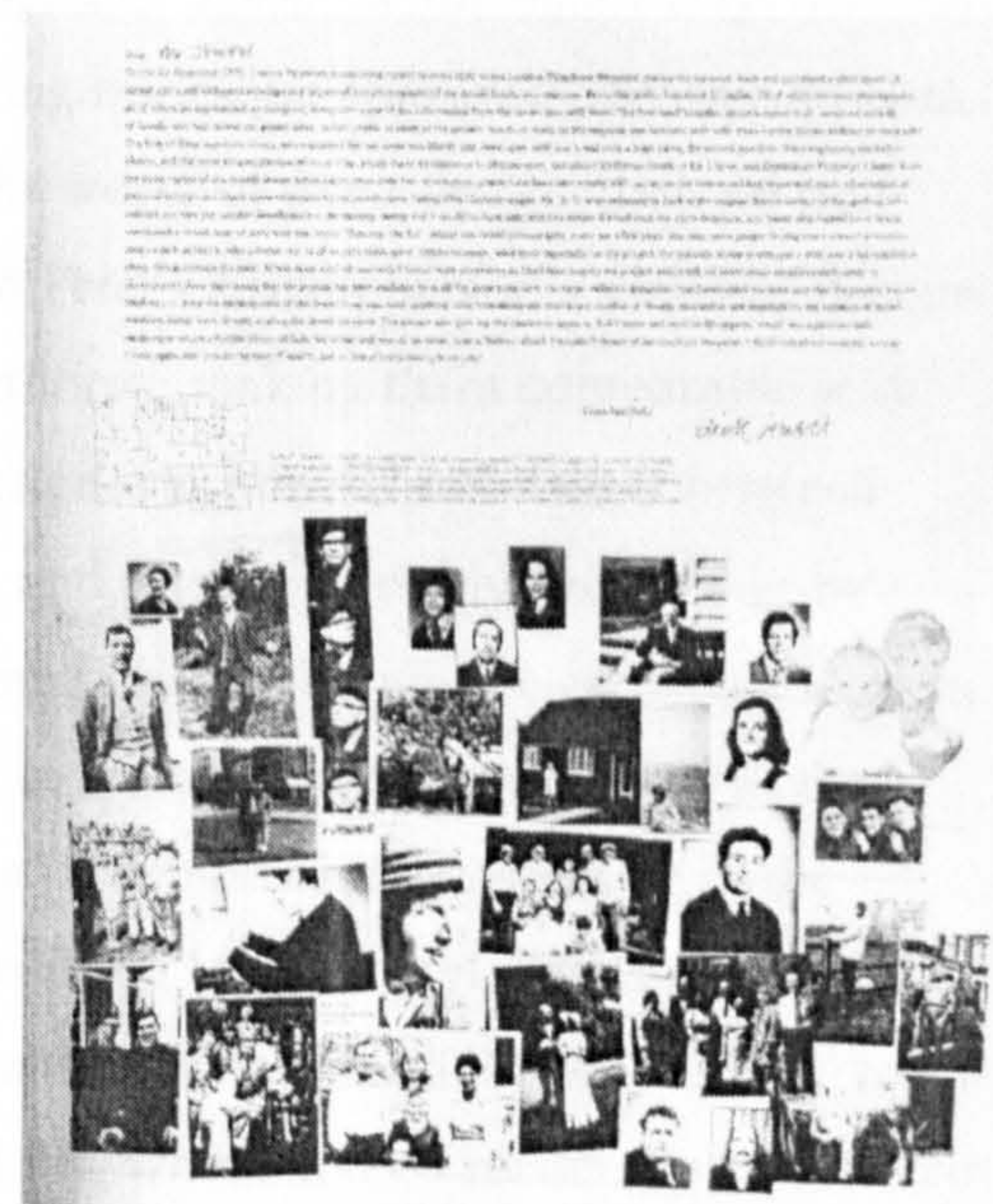
⁴²Ibid.

⁴³"Out of the 27 artists exhibiting, only one, Norman Hepple, felt unable to sign" the protest letter to the Arts Council of Great Britain over the exclusion of Atkinson and Rickaby's work from *Lives*. BOSHIER, "Lives", *Art Monthly*, Number 25, April 1979, p21.

Other inclusions helped to complicate matters. Sue Wells contributed photographs of a *Welsh Farming Community* (1979), taken in the ‘slice-of-life’ convention much discredited by photoconceptualists. Formally indistinguishable, Desmond O’Neill’s society photographs for *Tatler*, *Vogue* and *Harpers & Queen* were windows into a wealthy urban ruling class. Given that Wells and O’Neill were both advocates of obsolete ‘verist’ photographic practices, and photographers of (different) societies, what were viewers to make of their relative merits? To the average middle-class gallery-goer, the world represented in O’Neill’s photographs was no more or less ‘real’ than that seen in Wells’, both being in effect, the ‘Other’.

The inclusion of Dick Jewell’s found photograph projects helped to magnify such contradictions. Jewell initially received some critical attention in 1977 for his artists’ book *Found Photos*, which was produced as an ironic response to people’s fascination with photographs of the famous. Jewell’s book was comprised solely of reproductions of anonymous, discarded insta-matic portraits that he had been collecting from photobooths since the late 1960s. Significantly, these reproductions were *not* accompanied by texts; the abandoned pictures were simply presented for the viewer to flick through perceptively or myopically, however they wished. A similar approach had been used with *Cosmo Babies* (1976) in which Jewell juxtaposed the front covers of women’s’ lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan* with equally glamorous images of new born baby girls. Despite the obvious Althusserian overtones, there was never any explicit suggestion that this work *could be* critical of the media, Jewell being mainly interested in the flat aesthetics of the pun. Within the context of *Lives*, the *Jewell Family* (1977) [Figure 9.5] participative project formed a particularly neat pun in relation to O’Neill’s society pictures (Jewell Family = Family Jewels); yet Jewell was not interested in ruptural avant-gardism. Indeed, this project had involved extending the extremist tactics of *Vilesque* mail artists outwith the artworld in such a manner that their seditiousness would appear questionable.⁴⁴ Relinquishing the *Vile* contingent’s pubescent obsession with sex and death, Jewell simply wrote to everybody in the London telephone directory who shared his surname asking their permission to display any photographs which they chose to return to him. “It’s nice seeing from you”, he innocuously concluded in the accompanying text piece.

In *Lives*, Jewell’s depoliticised works were forced to contend with Peter Marlow’s ‘agitational’ reportage photojournalism: “Distributing pictures via agencies leaves the



⁴⁴ See Chapter 14 Decline of the English Avant-Garde.

photographer's work open to all kinds of misuses. The control the photographer has over the end result is small. Magazines can, and frequently do, disregard or change the emphasis of the accompanying text and the captions." The mere ability to recognise this fact, of course, had long been elevated into an (anti)artform by photoconceptualists such as Hillard, Stezaker, and Burgin. Boshier's *Lives* forced the artworld cognoscenti to question why they should ever have been so readily impressed by what commercial image makers took for granted. This point was finally driven home by Boshier who went one stage further than Brighton with the unedited inclusion of the 'enemy', Duffy's advertisements for Smirnoff, Clark Shoes, *Elle* and Benson & Hedges all of which were influenced by semio-art's use of text-image juxtaposition and Situationist inspired detournement.⁴⁵

Contradiction emerged everywhere. Gerald Scarfe's satirical caricatures of the puissant and Posy Symonds' cartoon comedies of manners on middle-class life were exhibited alongside numerous anonymously designed punk fanzines whose titles celebrated (mock) underclass impotence: *Bored Stiff*, *Scrapheap* and *Ripped & Torn*. While major class divisions were pinpointed here, self-class-decrepitation and biting burlesque appeared common to both camps. Greater divisions of labour emerged within the world of punk design, granted that Jamie Reid's satirical artworks for the Sex Pistols, and Peter Christopherson's sardonic designs for Throbbing Gristle's record sleeves were clearly authored, making them comparable with works of fine art in a way that much punk graphic design was not. The divisions between authored punk, anonymous punk, commercial design and fine art were blurred further by punk graphic designer Barney Bubbles who was commissioned to design the catalogue's cover. Bubbles was provided with a number of photographs of anonymous figures printed in the *County Times and Express*, Welshpool, (which were also exhibited independently in the show). These pictures were mordantly interspersed with the 'graphix-style', then an index of 'chic' in fashion magazines. Finally Boshier included a number of found 'Photo Albums' from his own collection alongside a section entitled 'Your Life', which invited readers to create their own photo project much as did Jo Spence.

In the event, *Lives* did prove popular with the public. For the critical sectors of artworld, however, this popularity was achieved at the expense of 'cleansing' the exhibits of their political impetus. For example, exhibiting punk graphics alongside Kitaj's figurative paintings, cartoons and photo-journalism from newspapers in a publicly funded gallery was seen to relativise punk as one style among many, tearing it from the confrontational environment which gave it its meanings and critical vigour.⁴⁶ With hindsight, it is probably

⁴⁵ "The major inadequacy of Andrew Brighton's current position (which correctly includes wild-life paintings, board-room portraits, etc.) seems to me to be that he ignores advertising altogether", FULLER, "Footnote 11: The Crisis in Professionalism", *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p87.

⁴⁶ As I will discuss in Chapter 14 *Decline of the English Avant-Garde*, by the late 1970s there were many pressures upon artists and critics to regard punk as a mere 'style'. It remains clear, nonetheless, that punk was initially opposed to the media culture with which it was compared in the *Lives* exhibition.

true to say that the opposite was the case. *Lives* celebrated contradiction at the expense of totalitarian complacency and smooth political transaction, asking viewers how they might convincingly account for the 'critical rights' of fine art. Unfortunately, *Lives* took place at a time in which the forces of reaction had significantly grown in strength within the British artworld. The critical factions of the artworld's refusal to deal with the difficult questions raised by Boshier can be judged only when considered against the predominant cases for the return of the figurative at the end of the 1970s. The combative anti-avant-garde assertions made by Ron Kitaj, David Hockney, Peter Fuller and Timothy Hyman served as the main catalyst for the

of British art in the early 1980s, a corollary of which was the suffocation of allegedly 'critical postmodernist' discourses on British practices. Feminist, Marxist and performance led critics who dominated the 1970s found themselves forced to compete against a 'new' reactionary voice, much to the detriment of criticism. Given its new task as a trenchant home guard, 'radical' art criticism was unable to keep up with practical events, and as such, no longer seemed particularly radical. If anything, however, this suggests the necessity of examining such 'reactionary postmodernism' in more detail than has previously been granted by its critical enemies in the Universities and Polytechnics.

Ironically the conservative trend in the visual arts ran riot. This was due, above all, to the confusion and paranoia left in the wake of an onslaught against modernism launched by pseudo-Marxist-writers, some of whom never understood the basic problems (confusing art with the market). They left destruction in their wake with no practicable alternative. The few theories that did emerge were difficult to apply to the traditional media to which they were by and large addressed, and misinterpretation brought the old reactionaries out in strength.⁴⁷

⁴⁷DAVID HALL, "Artists Thoughts in on the 70s in Words and Pictures", *Studio International*, Vol.195, No.991/2, 1981, p31.

CHAPTER 10

Nude Review

In 1925, Ortega y Gasset wrote what is still probably the most fundamental essay on modern art ever written: *The Dehumanisation of Art*. In it, he states that modern art is unpopular in essence, since it is aimed from the onset at a special gifted minority. [...] Whatever the errors of this situation may be, Ortega points out, there is one immovable point about it: the impossibility of going back.¹

One 'solution' is Kitaj's attempt to re-invoke the visual conventions of an earlier historical moment when the artist still retained a clearly defined social role, but this can be only a short-lived, retrogressive step.²

There are some fools around who will grasp at Ortega's old idea that there are very few people who are gifted with receptivity for any kind of art.³

It seems fated to me that art should have turned away (in horror) to a great introspective romance, but I am also beset with a feeling of lost paradise, that all is not well enough. [...] After half a digressive lifetime I have to dismantle my own unhappy resources and begin to draw all over again...⁴

While the Crisis Critic's stance placed them in a controversial position at the close of the 1970s, it also saw them, for a brief period, in the kind of powerful position traditionally ascribed to cultural trend-setters who have seemingly identified the *zeitgeist*. A return to narrative figurative painting had already emerged with the formation of The Brotherhood of Ruralists by Peter Blake on the 21st March 1975, a group of painters who would spend a working holiday together every year at Coombe in Cornwall.

Peter Blake has suggested that they were artists who chose, quite deliberately, to go and work as artists in the country (as opposed to the city), an environment no less real for the artist than the city, throughout twentieth-century urban snobbishness tends to think differently.⁵

Blake had become increasingly absorbed by the mythical aspects of the countryside in the early 70s, showing a great deal of interest in fairytales, folklore, legend and 19th century British art.

¹ SUZI GABLIK, "The Human Clay: Reviewed by Suzi Gablik", *Studio International*, 193 (1985) January 1977, p46.

² PETER FULLER, "Crisis in British Art: Part 2", *Art Monthly*, Number 9, July/August 1977, p13.

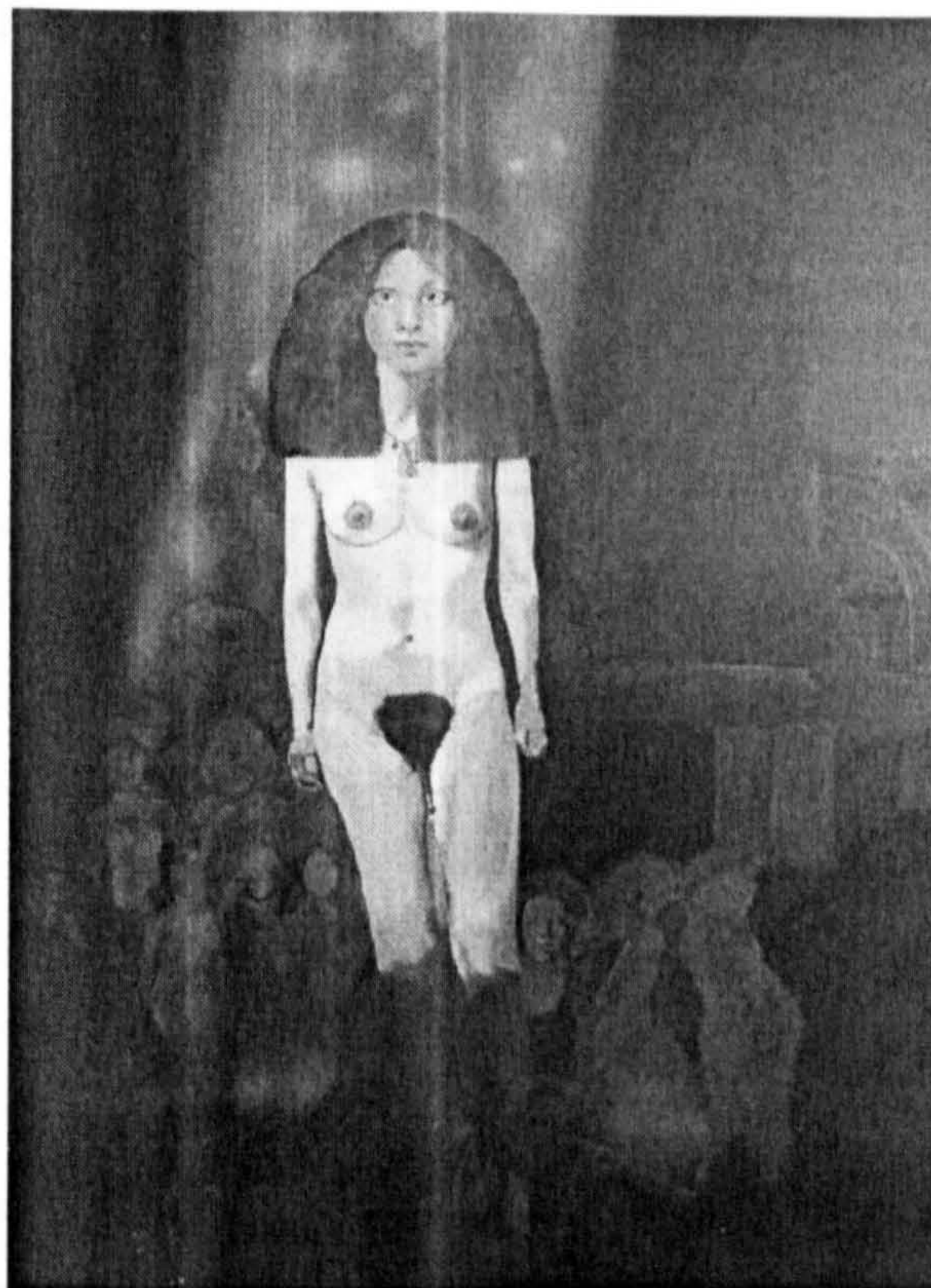
³ "RON. B. KITAJ interviewed by JAMES FAURE WALKER", *Artscribe*, 5, February 1977, p5.

⁴ KITAJ quoted in STEPHEN SPENDER, "Introduction", *R.B. Kitaj: Pastels and Drawings*, Marlborough Fine Art Catalogue, London, August 1980, P7.

⁵ NICHOLAS USHERWOOD, "The Brotherhood of Ruralists 1975-1980", *The Brotherhood of Ruralists*, Lund Humphries, London, 1981, p50.

A number of fairy paintings followed, mixing William Blake with Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite fantasies. Despite his change from flat acrylic paint to oil, Blake's distinctively sensual pop style remained evident, albeit in a more early-Netherlandish manner.

Titania (1976) [Figure 10.1], for example, was painted as a sexually aware adult, complete with pubic hair and a distinctly mid-70s coloured perm. The result was an uncomfortable contradiction between fantasy and verity, similar to that found in the magical realist literature of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. Despite their many fascinating ideas concerning the role of Romanticism, narrative and figuration in (British) visual art, The Brotherhood of Ruralists had no manifesto, no promotional strategy, and



held no bureaucratic positions, and therefore made little impact on the institutionalised British artworld. Moreover, given that they described themselves as a 'Brotherhood', it was assumed that they had no true populist agenda, hence they received no attention from the crisis critics. Their first exhibition, at the 1976 Royal Academy Summer Show, seemed only to reinforce the critics somewhat misconstrued notion that they were a reactionary organisation.

The following year Ron Kitaj voiced a somewhat similar position *vis a vis* the status of international modernist art. Kitaj's opinions were more audible and controversial since the Arts Council of Great Britain had asked him to curate *The Human Clay*, an exhibition of works by various British artists who had been actively celebrating the primacy of the human form in visual art. Clearly antagonistic to the forms of modern art espoused by the institutions then funded by Arts Council grants, Kitaj's assertions seemed to prefigure the *populist* polemics of the Crisis Critics:

If some wish to practice art for art's sake, so be it... but good pictures, will be made to which many lives can respond. When I'm told that good art has never been like that, I doubt it and in any case, it seems to me at least as advanced or radical to attempt a more social art as not to.⁶

If, however, we make a close historical inspection of Kitaj's polemical stance, we soon come to realise how distant it was far from the populism of the Crisis Critics. We find, for example,

⁶ KITAJ, "Against the Grain", *The Human Clay*, Hayward Gallery, Arts Council, 1976.

that Kitaj's education at Oxford in the 1950s instilled him with an unequivocally 'elitist' approach to picture making: "Most so-called socialist realism I've seen does not renew the depiction of people and so it is not as advanced as the art of old Tories like Ingres or Degas or Cezanne."⁷

It was at Oxford that Kitaj came under the influence of the Renaissance expert, Edgar Wind, in addition to the writings of Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, and Aby Warburg; art historians who "worked by examining motifs within a work, rather than giving primary concern to its overall stylistic character", analysing "the way in which visual motifs were connected with social life outside art" by drawing "analogies between visual and literary elaborations of the same subject."⁸ Like such iconological scholarship, Kitaj's early practice revealed his preoccupation with providing a context as a means both of modifying the viewer's response and connecting his artworks back to the world, "preventing at all costs *his* painting from becoming merely aesthetic."⁹ Following the iconological method, Kitaj worked with a plethora of disparate texts both visual and verbal - Kafka, the 13th-century mystic Ramon Lull, Erasmus, Nietzsche, 60s popular culture - in an attempt to create a profound, intellectual record of his dialogue with culture as a whole.¹⁰

It is important to note that the iconological method that influenced Kitaj was largely a humanist phenomenon, as Panofsky argued in *The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline* (1955). Of central importance to neo-Kantian Humanists such as Panofsky was the belief that the artist necessarily orders reality, as S. J. Wilshire points out:

Humanists believe that persons *create* works of art, not that they are themselves constructed out of language but that they are at the crossroads of its recreation. Such humanist beliefs are, of course, themselves the foundation of the cultural concepts of "imagination", "creation" and "originality" which make it still possible to talk about

⁷ KITAJ and DAVID HOCKNEY, "R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney Discuss the Case for a Return to the Figurative...", *New Review* 3 (34/35), January/February 1977, p75. Kitaj's statement (and his works) suggests that he is an "Elitist" in the sense that Roy Shaw upheld the value of an educated critical outlook, as opposed to the Bloomsbury Group's Nietzschean concept of elitism. He opposes the new social art favoured by the crisis critics because its overt user-friendliness may have a critically disabling effect.

⁸ MICHAEL PODRO, "From Springer to Warburg: Warburg and Botticelli's Mythologies", *The Critical Historians of Art*, Yale University Press, 1982, p158.

⁹ PODRO, "Some Notes on Ron Kitaj", *Art International*, 22 (10), March 1979, p18.

¹⁰ For further discussion see: [1] M. LIVINGSTONE, "Iconology as a Theme in the Early Work of R.B. Kitaj" *Burlington Magazine*, 122 (918), July 1980, p488-97. [2] del RENSIO, TONY. "Style, Technique and Iconography", *Art and Artists*, 11 July 1976, p34-9.

works of art in general. In this way humanist values are necessary to their very existence.¹¹

According to Humanists, even artists who wish to express disorder must organise their modes of expression in a manner that will (paradoxically) suit their particular world-view. In practise, this led Kitaj to juxtapose visual and verbal fragments from historical and contemporary cultures in a meaningful manner, albeit if the meanings often remained obscure to his audience.¹² In this Kitaj differed somewhat from American contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg whose jumbled screenprint collages nevertheless often bore striking resemblance to Kitaj's own.¹³ Rauschenberg and his mentor John Cage had been instrumental in the rejection of any hierarchy of materials, forms and colours in the visual arts. In their work, elements allegedly occurred only as themselves, permitted to come into their own "rather than being exploited to express sentiments of ideas of order."¹⁴

While, on a superficially formal level, Kitaj conformed to the neo-dada contention that "there was neither a socially and morally charged imagery which he could take for granted and deploy, nor a range of factual reference which he could assume his spectator could take for granted and draw upon",¹⁵ the epistemological conclusions of Rauschenberg and Cage's art were nonetheless placed under scrutiny. To Kitaj, Rauschenberg and Cage, in prioritising dadaesque indeterminacy over the artistic agency, had neglected the (Humanist) artist's moral duty of enforcing an interpretation on the world. "What had been lost, to put it so, was an *image of man*, some order of and in experience, both collective and singular, that could propose itself as constituting *something*..."¹⁶

Although Cage's anarchic aesthetic was far from nihilistic, it risked being fawning and uncritical. For Cage art was "a purposeless play... [which] however, is an *affirmation* of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply

¹¹ S. J. WILSMORE, "The New Attack on Humanism in the arts", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 27, Autumn 1987, p336.

¹² "Kitaj's intention in quoting from such sources is not to impress or dazzle the viewer but rather to deal with a complex of themes in an economical but open-ended fashion..." MARCO LIVINGSTONE, *R.B. Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p15.

¹³ Noting the formal similarities between Kitaj and Rauschenberg, Livingstone writes that the "deliberate scattering of attention across the surface of Kitaj's early painting provides an inducement for the mind to wander, focusing attention randomly on specific images as an equivalent to the mind's habit of jumping suddenly from vague reverie to a specific idea." *Ibid.*, p12.

¹⁴ John Cage interviewed in IRVING SANDLER, "The Duchamp-Cage Aesthetic", *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*, Harper & Row, New York, p165.

¹⁵ PODRO, "Some Notes on Ron Kitaj", p19.

¹⁶ ROBERT CREELEY, "Ecce Homo", *R.B. Kitaj: Pictures*, Marlborough Fine Art Catalogue, London, 1977, p4.

a way of waking up to the life we're living..."¹⁷ Although Kitaj, like Cage and Rauschenberg sought to root out the existential angst of Abstract Expressionism, his goal was to "sail through less nihilist waters than those navigated" by his contemporaries "towards an (ungraspable?) redemptive art".¹⁸ Adopting a more conservative approach, Kitaj believed would allow him to produce works that directly tackled subjects neglected by Modernism's Duchampian afterbirth. In a world where the centre would not hold, Kitaj increasingly turned for succour to those who affirmed life in their writing and painting, in their allegiances and convictions. While developing the impression of his working-self as intellectually *engaged*, Kitaj became increasingly concerned with provoking a similar effect on his audiences. Allusive titles were supported with source documentation in his exhibition catalogues, encouraging viewers to investigate meanings which transcend the empirical evidence of the work, thereby facilitating their understanding and enjoyment. This approach, Kitaj believed, would ensure that his audiences would enter and leave his artworks as part of the conduct of a wider purposeful life.¹⁹

I tend to refuse the notion that pictures should just linger and be left to their autonomous moment. It is never so. They *can* be taken up again and they always are in history.²⁰

In his references to publicly available material, Kitaj appeared to be more concerned than many of his peers in dealing with the public situation. Providing public images that had a general relevance to people within society led Kitaj to produce a complex conundrum: modern artworks weighed down by the lessons of the past.

By the mid-seventies, however, Kitaj was beginning to tire of some of the more radical aspects of his working process.²¹ His change in attitude appears in transitional works such as *If Not, Not* (1975-76). On first inspection of such works it seems as though he was moving

¹⁷ JOHN CAGE, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Cambridge Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967, p12 (My emphasis)

¹⁸ KITAJ quoted in ANDREW BRIGHTON, "Conversations with R.B. Kitaj", *Art in America*, 74, June 1986, p102.

¹⁹ KITAJ, "On Associating Texts with Paintings", *Cambridge Opinion*, January 1964, p52-3.

²⁰ KITAJ quoted in LIVINGSTONE, *R.B. Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p8.

²¹ "Surrealist ideas like bringing images together in unlikely and unfamiliar conjunction (in hope of producing magic), and other such ideas, attracted me when I was young. Now I can see that what may have seemed outrageous and valuable in that practice was often only an exaggerated form of what is substantial and even life-giving in *all* art... I mean to say that so much of what I care about in art has to do with the unfamiliar, prodigious, surprising character of what a truly original artist does in his pictures anyway." *Ibid.*, p42, Footnote 4.

towards a High Modernist position. For example, Kitaj was clearly continuing to declare his modernity in his ready borrowings from Modernist literature, albeit in less recondite fashion. Kitaj based the work both on the mood and the collaged division of images found in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.²² Like Eliot's poem, *If Not, Not* stresses its own internal factors, the patterned relationships between figures imparting a sense of metonymy rather than metaphor. Moreover, Kitaj was becoming increasingly Modernist in the ways he applied paint - in some images thinning it to little more than a wash, in others daubing it over a ground with expressionistic fervour, revealing an overwhelming preoccupation with process. Of this, James Faure Walker was critical: "The problem for me is that when I look at your pictures [...] they do depend on conjunctions of colour and shape, on formal devices, as much as on recognisable images. If anything they're obstructive for the ordinary person to interpret."²³

Figure 10.2 R.B. Kitaj *If Not, Not*. (1975-6)



While Faure Walker was surely correct to insist that the consumption of art is an acquired skill, by claiming to speak for the 'man in the street' he repeated the patronising stance of the Crisis Critics. It should also be noted that Faure Walker failed to consider the major change in approach that lay in Kitaj's system of hierarchy. Although he maintained an interest in literary sources and titles, Kitaj began to experience less of a compulsion to buttress his work with exceedingly complex materials of that character. Rather, he was now seeking to link his work with the sweeping historical paintings of Gericault or Poussin, both in his choice of subjects and the monumentality of his compositions, transforming the canvas into an illusionary stage. On a formal level, Kitaj extended the links between the present and past through an astonishing array of allusions to the paintings of Robert Motherwell, Van Gogh, Giorgione, Michelangelo, Cezanne, Goya, and Francis Bacon, among others, and the drawings of Degas.

Kitaj's turn to what might be considered a more academic method was not wholly for the sake of an empty traditionalism; rather it allowed him to create works which would underscore the tragic twisting of humanist goals which occurred during the twentieth-century.

²² See: RENSESELAER W. LEE, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*. (As a Painting So is Poetry), W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1967. Kitaj could be said to create a High Modernist form of "picture poetry", or a *New Humanistic Theory of Painting*, in lamenting the ascension of the concrete and the material over the symbolic and the spiritual by stressing his work's materiality.

²³ FAURE WALKER, "R.B. Kitaj Interviewed by James Faure Walker", p5.

For example, the “gatehouse at Auschwitz actually figures in *If Not, Not*, as one of a number of sinister intrusions in an otherwise idyllic landscape inspired by Giorgione’s *La Tempesta*.”²⁴ In this, Kitaj obliquely refers to the *First Great German Art Exhibition* of Munich 1937, a show which was dominated by pastoral landscapes, depictions of a pre-industrial, ‘healthy’ world (unblemished by Nazi autobahns and munitions factories.) Drawing on the hypocrisy evident in the Nazi glorification of the idyllic ‘simple life’, *If Not, Not*, presents a superficially utopian landscape populated with the innocent victims of an all-powerful dystopian populism. Thus the efficacy of *If Not, Not*, might be seen to lie in its morphological capacity to elude the dangers of the intellectual naiveté it depicts, its formal and practical conservatism being compatible with Kitaj’s long-standing belief that artworks should *actively* make viewers aware of the historical reality of their situation. It was in providing points of access using images which could be more readily understood, that Kitaj aimed to make his work more accessible to the ‘masses’ it was intended to ‘cure’.²⁵

Significantly he blends an acute historical awareness with a contradictory technical achievement which parallels Post-Modernist pluralism while at the same time pursuing the emancipatory and utopian ideal inherent in Modernism.²⁶

Although Kitaj continued to mine art history for images and inspiration in an attempt to convincingly proclaim his work within a *visual* equivalent to the ‘*Great Tradition*’ of Pound and Eliot, he felt that his quasi-mystical quest for meaning would be successful only if the artwork *itself* suggested possible solutions by presenting his ideas in a comprehensible manner. Kitaj, then, was seeking ways in which to make the realisation of the subject of equal importance to the form of the work: “Ultimate skill and imagination would seem to assume a plenitude in painting when the ‘earthed’ human image is compounded in the great compositions, enigmas, confessions, prophecies, sacraments, fragments, questions which have been and will be peculiar to the art of painting.”²⁷ Such a form of painting required a

²⁴ “*If Not, Not* is based on *The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot (who is portrayed in the lower left corner). What at first appears a lush primal landscape in the tradition that stretches from Giorgione to Gauguin and Matisse, turns out to be the terrible war-ravaged limbo of Eliot’s poem. Everything festers. The terrain creeps Dali-like with fragmentary phantoms, a rock is also a head, the figures seem to be drowning in a kind of marsh. Here we can recognise from Eliot’s poem the corpses that “sprout”, the sexual apparitions, sickly and insidious, “stony rubbish”, “a heap of broken images”. And as we look closer at the monastery or farmhouse on the hill we recognise it, horrifyingly, as an Auschwitz gatehouse.” LIVINGSTONE, R.B. *Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p35.

²⁵ TIMOTHY HYMAN, “Another Branch of the Family”, *Narrative Paintings: Figurative Art of Two Generations Selected by Timothy Hyman*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 1979, p6.

²⁶ JIM AULICH, “The Difficulty of Living in an Age of Cultural Decline and Spiritual Corruption: R.B. Kitaj 1965-1970, *The Oxford Art Journal*, Vol.10, No.2, 1987, p43.

²⁷ KITAJ, “Pearl diving”, *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.

qualitative transformation of existing idioms and techniques, a method of production that could change the significance of the material given expression. Hence the piecemeal quality of Kitaj's early collage works was soon superseded by balanced compositions, illusionistic space and 'draughtsmanly dexterity'. It was by imprinting his work with inflections absorbed from his unique personal history, Kitaj felt, that he might clarify his humanist intent to actively transform the viewer's experience of the world.

In seeking to produce works which would be complete in themselves, Kitaj was ostensibly against the montagist aesthetic dominant in the post-conceptual art of late 1970s. While semio-artists, feminists, punks, and painters such as Kitaj's former friend and neighbour Francis Bacon actively mirrored the century's tendency toward senseless violence, Kitaj endeavoured to refract his times. An authoritative example of Kitaj's new figurative allusionism is *The Jew Etc.* (1976-9) [Figure 10.3], a work which signalled his growing obsession with his own Jewish identity, the product, in part, of the influence of Walter Benjamin's later writings with their underlying reference to redemptive Judaism. In Benjaminian terms, the traveller gazing out the train window in the unfinished, almost monochromatic uncertain pilgrimage wherein he may act out his 'own unfinish.' Against this Diaspora, *The Jew Etc.* places our elective affinities, the friendships and families we forge in the midst of terror.



While Benjamin and the Frankfurt Hochschule's sociology of culture played a significant role in shaping Kitaj's ideas about painting - their model of popular high art leading him to question the disrespect for figurative art - we should regard Kitaj's increasing emphatic insistence as resulting from his growing awareness of a 'fundamental condition' of the artist's venture:

Acknowledging someone as a person, or an object as an artwork, involves a willingness to take up toward them the sort of attitude Peter Strawson has called "reactive": praise, blame, outrage, anger, admiration, love, hate and so on. By contrast, to treat someone non-judgementally, or to see an object without feeling already to respond to it with any reactive attitude, is to strip it of its humanity or arthood.²⁸

²⁸ FLINT SHIER, "Painting after Art?: Comments on Wollheim", *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1991, p155.

Or in Kitaj's own words: "To put it a simple way: many of us like to make pictures of people because people and their lives interest us more than anything else."²⁹ Kitaj's commonsensical theorising (misleadingly) suggests that he had little time for the philosophical intricacies of the Frankfurt Hochschule: "My Kulcher ain't as cultivated as most of the streetsmart theorists, from Greenberg and Judd to the post-Lacanian *pishers*, even though I've done some theoretical *pishing* myself."³⁰

Nonetheless, we should note that while Kitaj was advocating a less reflexive approach to theoretical matters, his shift to a more 'comprehensible' mode of communication in fact was no more than a move from obscure literary references to more readily available and easily consumable art historical sources, again, a move much against the grain of the times.³¹ Although this seemed superficially plausible, when it came to the matter of interpretation, as Fuller pointed out, both sets of references required a great deal of prior knowledge and developed critical ability on behalf of the viewer: "...when all this has been said and done about how art should break out, acquire a new subject matter, and all the rest, what does he [Kitaj] paint? Portraits of John Golding, painter and art historian and *The Orientalist*, a fantastic imaginary figure, superimposed with literary and art references. He makes the same mistake as he opposes himself to."³²

In order to circumvent this problem, Kitaj increasingly made use of his own leitmotifs, recycling images, including figurative characters, from one work to another: "I like the idea that it might be possible to invent a figure, a character in a picture the way novelists have been able to do - a memorable character like the people you remember out of Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy."³³ The figure with the hearing-aid depicted in *The Jew Etc*, who had also made an

²⁹ KITAJ, "Mondrian", *The Human Clay*, Hayward Gallery. Arts Council 1976.

³⁰ KITAJ quoted in BRIGHTON, "Conversations with R.B. Kitaj", p102. It might even be argued that in opposing ideological analysis in favour of "instinct" and "practical wisdom", Kitaj was unwittingly aligning himself with the populist tactics of the New Right. Moreover, Kitaj's move to assimilate his art into a pattern of fixed expectations and immobilised beliefs also testifies to his increasingly conservative frame of mind. Nonetheless, like the Crisis Critics, Kitaj's intentions were honourable.

³¹ In general, postmodernist art has moved from 'presentness', towards 'theatre'; literally the opposite direction to Kitaj.

³² FULLER, "An Interview with David Hockney. Part II", *Art Monthly*, No. 13, December/January 1977-8, p6. Kitaj scholar and friend Michael Podro, while lacking Fuller's overt critical agenda, also noted this problem: "...there is, I think, a tension between Kitaj's assumed literary aesthetic and his visual aesthetic, between his concern to make an emotionally charged private art for a small group of initiates, and a publicly resonant art." PODRO, "Some Notes on Ron Kitaj", p23. Lynda Morris, on the other hand, correctly analysed its effect: "One gets a bit irritated as books bearing the legend of Wollheim, Gramsci and Leger jostle with an alarm clock and pudding basin on the breakfast table." LYNDA MORRIS, "Popular Front", *The Listener*, 97 (2510), 26 May 1977, p693.

³³ "R.B. KITAJ interviewed by JAMES FAURE WALKER", p5.

appearance in *If Not, Not*, was again to appear in *Bad Faith* (1980), *The Jewish School* (1980), *The Listener* (1980), and *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)* (1983-4) [Figure 10.4]

While he has identified the character as 'Joe Singer', a friend of his mother's whom he remembered from childhood, Kitaj has sought to make him into "an archetype representing a condition of man, and more specifically of the Jew, in the twentieth century".³⁴ Singer became a leitmotif that Kitaj could control and manipulate, changing context to change meaning. Although audiences now had to be familiar with Kitaj's personal iconography in order to make sense of new works, they were simultaneously released



from the interpretative burdens of the past, opening up enormous realms of meaningful possibilities: "Pound's great advice was enough: that demarcation he spoke of between a symbol which in effect exhausts its references and a sign or mark of something which constantly renews its reference."³⁵

Kitaj's use of character invention was, of course, not new to the visual arts, William Blake being a notable precursor. Like Blake's, Kitaj's character invention may be read as a Romantic attempt to gain artistic freedom from the interpretative strictures of academic and popular iconography. However, as was the instance with Blake's symbolic obscurantism, gaining greater control over production does not necessitate a corresponding degree of authority over the reception of art; leading, as it may, towards the realm of private language games. Nevertheless, while Kitaj's critics believed that his unorthodox tendencies made his work increasingly incongruous, Kitaj scholars held this quality to be the most alluring and compelling aspect of his work. On the one hand, a consummate example of the most substantial and long-running critique concerning the value Kitaj's work is the argument initiated by Peter Plagens: "Kitaj is 'interesting' because he's tricky, ambiguous and complex. [...] Kitaj doesn't do more than embellish narrative enigmas with graphic deftness; his work - unlike [Francis] Bacon's - doesn't move you or scare you *as painting*."³⁶ Plagens seems to point to Kitaj's inherent weakness, namely, his inability to develop an *affective* mode of communication. Kitaj scholars such as Michael Podro have, nevertheless, sought to counter

³⁴ LIVINGSTONE, R.B. *Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p34.

³⁵ KITAJ quoted in *ibid.*, p17.

³⁶ PETER PLAGENS "European Painting in LA: A Grab Bag of Well-worn Issues", *Artforum*, 14 (5), January 1976, p41.

this, arguing that “the effect of having stained the canvas with paint evokes the exposure of a light-sensitive photographic plate, to which is added the drawn marks of the graphic journalist. This is part of his documentary immediacy. He does not invite attention to the cuisine of painting but to the nerve of subject matter.”³⁷ This, however, seems to imply a contradiction, not least in relation to Kitaj’s professed allegiance to the *Great Tradition* of “Giotto, Pierro, Michelangelo or hundreds of years later Ingres, Delacroix, Goya, Degas, Cezanne, or in our own time Matisse and Picasso”.³⁸ How could Kitaj produce artworks with a “documentary immediacy” which were also thick in their textual references? For many of his critics, he clearly could not, his affected technique ultimately forming a deterrent to the ‘interesting’ aspects of his work. Yet, as Andrew Brighton pointed out, Kitaj’s critical failure may in fact result from the failure of critics, for it was Kitaj who “stuck with imaginative culture when so many of us were afflicted with theoreticist hubris - whether by way of Greenberg or Marx.”³⁹

So, not being wise to advanced art, I never developed a sense of what you can and can’t do, and I’ve watched wave after wave of ‘progressive’ art these 30 years, progress past my hopeless dioramas, until, when I started to draw again the shit hit the fan, and I was roundly cursed by many advanced art people who are smarter and more well-read than I am but not as literary (ugh) as me. Now a lot of the newest wave is quite literary (ugh) but I guess that will pass too and I’ll be left behind again like a schmuck. Don’t you feel sorry for me?⁴⁰

Towards the end of the seventies, Kitaj found sympathy from David Hockney:

To me, a lot of painters were trapping themselves; they were picking such a narrow aspect of painting and specialising in it. And it’s a trap. Now there’s nothing wrong with the trap if you have the courage to just leave it, but it takes a lot of courage, if you look back in the history of painting.⁴¹

Like Kitaj, Hockney’s backward glance was partly inspired by the confusion endemic in the late seventies British artworld.⁴² When asked by Fuller to defend his work against the critical reverie of the period, Hockney responded in line with Kitaj:

³⁷ PODRO, “Some Notes on Ron Kitaj”, p21.

³⁸ KITAJ, “R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney Discuss the Case for a Return to the Figurative...”, p75.

³⁹ BRIGHTON, “Conversations with R.B. Kitaj”, p102.

⁴⁰ KITAJ quoted in *ibid.*

⁴¹ HOCKNEY, ed. NIKOS STANGOS, “Realism turning into naturalism”, *David Hockney by David Hockney*, Thames & Hudson, London 1977, p104.

⁴² “There definitely is a kind of crisis in the visual arts. [...] I don’t think it’s a very serious thing; I know it will be overcome.” “Figurative art and the new synthesis”, *ibid.*, p130.

We've talked about art being shut in on itself. One way of working towards a solution might be to choose subjects that relate to the lives of a greater number of people.

I agree of course. That's why I am always painting the figure. You can interest people who don't know much about painting; the figure is the most important thing in people's lives.⁴³

Such populist polemic was given its most controversial tone earlier in 1977 when a naked Hockney and Kitaj were featured on the cover of *New Review*.⁴⁴

Like Kitaj, Hockney was chastised for his efforts. Most vehement were the comments in the ordinarily conservative *Arts Review* where it was argued that it was too late to revert to the primacy of the figure because the "boundaries of content, or making pictures of people" had been irrevocably "extended beyond recognition".⁴⁵

While Kitaj and Hockney argue for a return to the figure, we would argue for a continuation of the questions: Why create? Why art? For as the situation exists today, the quality of creation is more important to us than its content.⁴⁶

It is unsurprising to find that Kitaj and Hockney's stance should have aroused the suspicions of modernists and postmodernists alike; especially if we consider that a central tenet of twentieth century anti-aesthetics has been the notion that art may only continue to carry conviction by distancing itself from the Ptolemaic certainties of the pre-modern era. Consequently, those who objected to Kitaj and Hockney's concerns were making a well-versed philosophical protest against their apparently conservative agenda of reimposing a stultifying centre in a post-Copernican era:

[To] conduct a dispute around phrases like 'depiction of people and things in the visible world' implies a great narrowing-down and misrepresentation of what has actually happened in twentieth-century art. It was exactly the conception of the

⁴³ FULLER, "An Interview with David Hockney. Part II", *Art Monthly*, No. 13, December/January 1977-8, p5. Hockney's statement is almost identical to Kitaj's: "many of us like to make pictures of people because people and their lives interest us more than anything else." KITAJ, "Mondrian", *The Human Clay*, Hayward Gallery. Arts Council 1976. Hockney, however, goes further, "I think that the idea of making pictures for 25 people in the artworld is crazy and ridiculous. It should be stopped; in some way it should be pointed out that it can't go on."

⁴⁴ KITAJ and HOCKNEY, "R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney Discuss the Case for a Return to the Figurative...", *New Review* 3 (34/35), January/February 1977, p75-7.

⁴⁵ M and D. ACKERMAN, "Dear Kitaj and David: The Quality of the Creation is More Important Than the Content." *Arts Review* 29, 29 April 1977, p287.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

homogeneous 'visible world' handed down from the Renaissance that was broken by modern art, and not only by art but also by science, by physical and social science, and by modern experience generally.⁴⁷

It was unfortunate that the binary nature of Hockney's reasoning should have obscured the intricacies of his new work, for as he repeatedly stated, his turn to the art of the past was not an *arriere-garde* tactic, but an indeterminate route within the dominant Hegelian account of modern art:⁴⁸

I feel that some older figurative painters aren't aware of recent art history at all. Their art doesn't show it; there's no reference to the great complexity of the last fifty years. ...I certainly begin to see that there's great scope for trying now to make the diversity of modernism into a synthesis.⁴⁹

Hockney's approach was in fact quite complex in its relationship with the dominant art paradigms of the late seventies. In speaking broadly of a "synthesis", Hockney was seeking to unite the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of twentieth-century art. While art has traditionally been perceived as Apollonian - inspirational, aspiring to high ideals, reinforcing our noblest visions, pure and good - much modern art concerned itself with the Dionysian, the dangerous, disruptive, violent and shocking aspects of modern life which provoke distress. Hockney's proposed task was complicated by the fact that the Dionysian impetus had come to dominate the art of the late seventies. Indeed, it was the obscuratist insistence of Dionysian art which the crisis critics, in their blunt manner, reacted against. Yet, it was in seeking to resurrect a seemingly Ptolemaic sense of the Apollonian, that led to Hockney's new work being condemned as similarly uncritical and conservative.

As Hockney's work appeared to illustrate, this issue simply could not be dealt with in terms of the conceptualist posturing popular in the earlier 1970s. Coherent critical positions could no longer be formed around the notion of the avant-garde. As Burgin had recently pointed out, much of the conceptualist work of the late seventies had become as tired and academic as the formalism which it superseded: "...once beyond the official closures of 'legitimate' art practice many found that they had exchanged their prison for a desert. They

⁴⁷ GUY BRETT, "What is the Tradition", (Discussion of Kitaj's *Artist's Eye* Exhibition), *Art Monthly*, 38, 1980, p2. Brett continues, "The idea of championing figurative traditions against some imagined threat from abstraction is a meaningless conflict which is being used by both conservative and populist commentators."

⁴⁸ "Given their fighting tone, it is not surprising that the case they were putting forward was grossly misinterpreted both by their reputed supporters and by their detractors. The latter labelled them reactionary, while the former used them as symbolic leaders of a "return to the figurative", and both parties tend to regard them as agents of the destruction of Modernism. It was not Modernism they were attacking, however, but Modernist academicism." LIVINGSTONE, *David Hockney*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1981, p189.

⁴⁹ HOCKNEY, ed. STANGOS, "Figurative art and the new synthesis", p 130.

learned that there is nothing to be made of a conceptualism, defined in opposition to Modernism, other than an 'official opposition'; and that there is nothing to be made of Modernist art history other than a history of Modernism."⁵⁰

Indeed, while there were substantial differences, the set of values and concerns legitimating conceptualism remained somewhat similar to those which had propped up modernist art, namely, the rhetorical impetus of an increasingly epistemological and essentialist approach to production. It was in this sense that postmodernist art could be said to be indebted to a teleological scheme similar to that outlined by Modernists such as Clive Bell, and Greenberg, gaining critical value by a similarly incestuous self-support system. Consequently, many artists who subscribed to such a view of historical development were permitted to enjoy feelings of confidence and superiority. There was, therefore, a great deal of suspicion that the art which followed modernism was not significantly different:

I would have a problem with describing myself as a postmodernist because I thought that all that postmodernism was, in a sense, was an extension of modernism. It was Poppennian. My objection to them was that they were historicists, they would evaluate what was valuable in the present in relation to the modernist art of the past.⁵¹

While Hockney found that he had no option but to locate his work within this rapidly disintegrating critical schema, he did so by utilising his developed sense of pictorial wit, thereby denying legitimacy to the dominant cerebral aesthetic characteristic of Minimalist and Conceptualist art. Hockney's evaluative agenda differed radically from the smug academic mind-set of the late seventies: "To me, art, especially modern art, is idiosyncratic. The idea of the mainstream is an irrelevant thing. [...] In art the peripheries are more interesting."⁵² Hockney engaged in little dialogue with conceptualist concerns, aiming rather to produce candid figurative and narrative paintings which retained some of the formal urgency and integrity of modernist art.

The quirky manner in which Hockney was seeking a practical escape from the claustrophobic critical debates of the period is charmingly depicted in his portrait of the formalist art historian and curator Henry Geldzahler, *Looking at Pictures on a Screen*, Oil on

⁵⁰ VICTOR BURGIN, "Socialist Formalism", *Two Essays on Art, Photography and Semiotics*, Robert Self, 1976. Although admittedly from a vastly different perspective, Burgin's statement is worth comparing with Kitaj's observation: "Often they're [i.e. Conceptualists] very wrong in thinking they're in the midst of some rebellion because the rebellion passed long ago, so it's sad to see so any people attaching themselves like sheep to establish vanguardism. There isn't only one new academy, there are dozens." KITAJ, "R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney Discuss the Case for a Return to the Figurative...", p76.

⁵¹ Interview with BRIGHTON, Tate Gallery, London, February 1998.

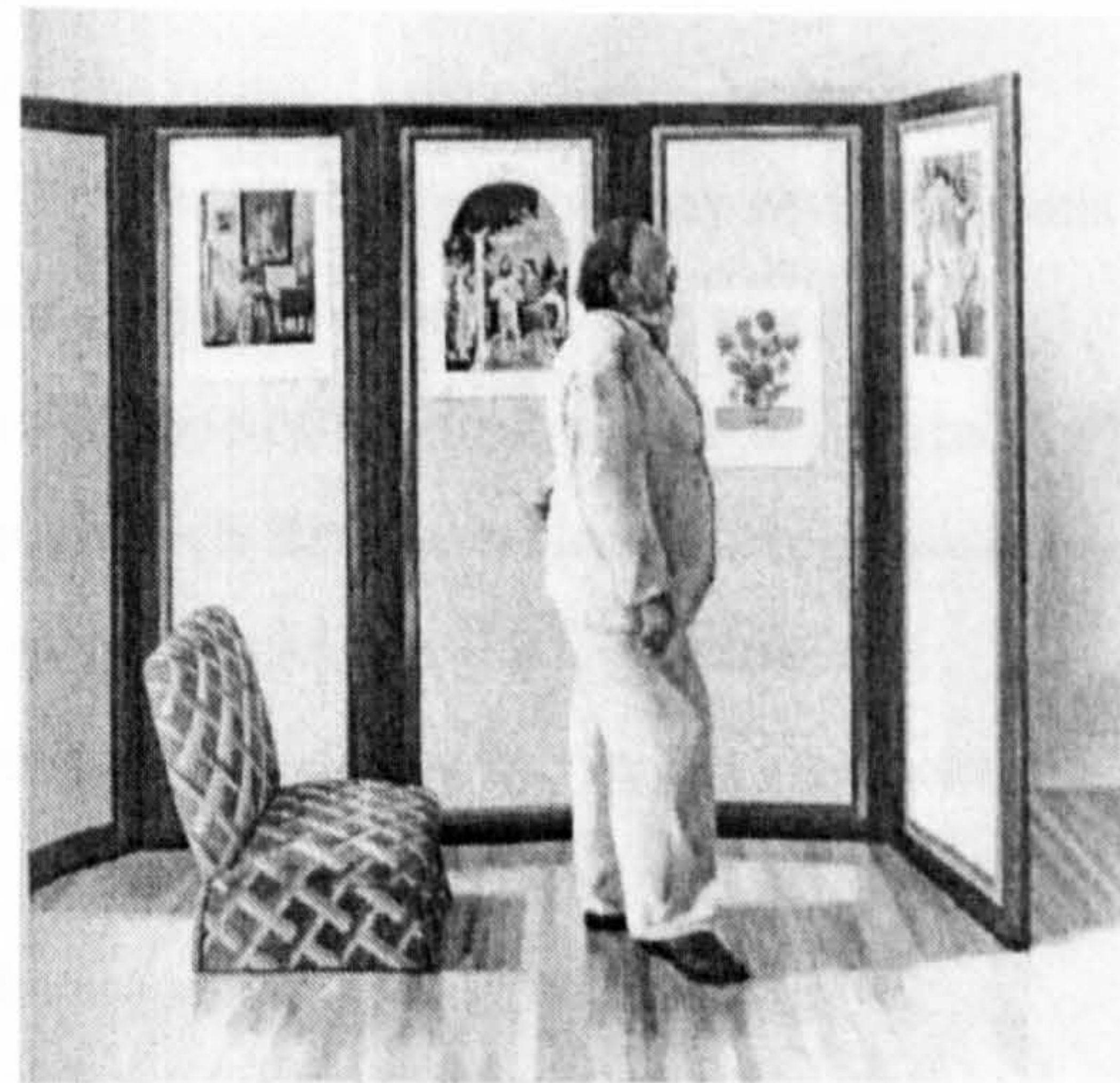
⁵² HOCKNEY, ed. STANGOS, "Figurative art and the new synthesis", p 131.

Canvas, New York, Andre Emmerich Gallery Inc. (1977). When asked to describe this work Hockney repeatedly sought to underscore his Kitaj-like contention that “it is always figures that look at pictures. It’s nothing else. [...] You don’t get *Red and Blue Number Three* looking at *Blue and Brown Number Four*.”⁵³

The painting is called *Looking at Pictures on a Screen*: this means that the spectator is having the same experience as the subject of the painting. If you’ve got yourself to here, in front of the canvas, whoever you are, then he is looking at pictures on a screen, but so are you. You are even looking at them on your screen as well as his. It’s true it’s meant to be enclosed, all closed in.⁵⁴

He’s trapped with pictures. He’s not looking at real things. He’s living in a small world.⁵⁵

Looking at Pictures on a Screen (1977), [Figure 10.5] then, encourages an ironic emphatic response, offering some intimation of escape from the closed world of the modern artworld, yet ultimately negating the value of quotidian knowledge. Thus, like Kitaj, Hockney demonstrated a cultural uneasiness concerning the value of empirical naturalism.



In Hockney’s work, however, this uneasiness was presented in a seemingly comic manner. The structural character of the reflective glass table in *Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott*, for example, was accomplished with unashamedly kitsch hieroglyphic diagonal lines. The difference between Hockney’s Apollonian pseudo-Pop and his Dionysian American Pop counterparts is nonetheless stated. While artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol made dadaesque jokes *on* painting, Hockney created affirmative jests *within* painting. In his related series of pseudo-formalist experiments with artistic devices interspersed with exercises in naturalism, Hockney imparted his work with this new identity; cultivating his own idiosyncratic obsessions, while demonstrating “again and again that all art - whether figurative or non-figurative - is abstraction.”⁵⁶ In so doing, however, Hockney largely avoided the interpretative liability of art historical appropriation or of personal iconography found in

⁵³ HOCKNEY, “R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney Discuss the Case for a Return to the Figurative...”, p76.

⁵⁴ FULLER, “An Interview with David Hockney. Part II”, p7.

⁵⁵ CHRISTIAN GEELHAAR, “Looking at Pictures with David Hockney”, *Pantheon* 36, July September 1978. p232.

Kitaj's work. It would seem that Hockney rather than Kitaj was creating an *intelligible* "sign or mark of something which constantly renews its reference."⁵⁷

In his numerous, tentative experiments of the late-seventies, Hockney effectively reopened the humanist agenda on materialist terms, achieving some form of synthesis by reinventing a context and internalising it:

The form of the painting has to be dealt with; it's very complex. That's where modernism has to be taken into account. If you could find that synthesis, then you could fuse it with something that would be really worthwhile. [...] The lay audience is less interested in formal problems; but the non-lay audience is interested in them, and criticises them. So I'm wedged in between.⁵⁸

Hockney, like his friend Kitaj, seemed to be suggesting that it was art critics and scholars - with their narrow set of personal bugbears - who had missed the point. Unlike, Kitaj, however, Hockney did not (even ironically) seek our sympathy. On the contrary, Hockney revelled in his paradoxical status as an 'establishment outcast'. With his highly-respected, charming demeanour of agnostic pragmatism, Hockney was in effect one of the first British artists to effectively violate the rhetoric of opposition and critique which had for so long formed an index of value for 'advanced' contemporary art. Following Hockney's lead, a number of British artists of the later Seventies and early Eighties began to seek out the spaces *between* the dominant critical paradigms of their day.

The most important branch of British art to develop from Kitaj and Hockney's pronouncements came in the shape of *Narrative Painting* selected by Timothy Hyman for the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol where it was shown from September to October 1979, before travelling to the ICA, London, Stoke-on-Trent and Edinburgh. This alerted artists to the continuing importance of figurative Pop Art while drawing attention to artists such as Peter de Francia, Jeffrey Camp and Ken Kiff. It was rather prophetically suggested that exposure of such work might induce a 'naive', less obtusely theoretical forms of art than the kinds of social art produced for Cork's exhibitions. Like Brighton, Hyman also hoped to encourage artists to explore alternative, non-modernist, art histories. Unsurprisingly this merely amounted to an alternative white, male, Eurocentric vision of modern art, placing strong emphasis on the lessons of Leger, Beckmann and Balthus since *they* made "a nonsense out of all those schema by which the art of our time has been viewed as a progress to, or "beyond", abstraction."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p230.

⁵⁷ KITAJ quoted in LIVINGSTONE, R.B. *Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p17.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p10

⁵⁹ Hyman 'discovered' many of these artists by placing an advertisement in the letters page of *Art Monthly*.

On the one hand, this created some interest in a new generation that included little Englishers such as Anthony Green, one of the few contemporary artists who represented middle-class urbanites without attempting to criticise them! On the other hand, the exhibition gave exposure to the Scottish Marxian narrative painter Alexander Moffat.

Moffat was slower to develop; a passion for Leger helped commit him to socialism, and he went to work in a factory. Through John Berger he met Peter de Francia, and when I first encountered Moffat two years ago he was preparing de Francia's Camden retrospective. [...] the dry graphic surface recalls Moffat's admiration for Kitaj.⁶⁰

Moffat in turn adopted Hyman's thesis when teaching at Glasgow School of Art, with unexpected results:

During and after the performances came a series of figurative paintings featuring a single person... I called him Hunt. I was painting him at the same time I had all these 1940s murder magazines - I looked down and saw the headline: 'Is it Hunt or is it ... ?' He is athletic, wears a raincoat, walks around a lot and falls from great heights.⁶¹

Steven Campbell's use of the character Hunt has many parallels with Kitaj's use of 'Joe Singer', despite the fact that Campbell's narrative approach was in direct contrast to Kitaj's, (obscure literary references rather than readily available art historical sources). If Joe Singer was "an archetype representing a condition of man, and more specifically of the Jew, in the twentieth century"⁶², then Hunt was his postmodern shadow, an incompetent voyager-detective trapped in a painted world. Like Kitaj, Campbell continued to make use of his own leitmotifs, recycling images from one work to another: "I went to New York on the Fulbright and turned [Hunt] into the Lost Hiker, which became the title for many of the pictures."⁶³ Such 'visual art' influences became increasingly important following Campbell's forced transferral to the Department of Painting and Drawing succeeding the closure of Roger Hoare's Mixed Media Department, (where Campbell had pursued performance art). Campbell's tutor became Moffat.

In line with Hyman's thesis, Moffat earnestly stressed to students the importance of Leger, Beckmann and Balthus. Analogous art historical references quickly multiplied in Campbell's work, promoting one commentator to describe his paintings as "Sendak and Glen

⁶⁰ HYMAN, "Ten Younger Artists", *Narrative Paintings: Figurative Art of Two Generations Selected by Timothy Hyman*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 1979, p28.

⁶¹ STUART MORGAN, "Soup's On: An Audience with Stephen Campbell", *Artscribe*, No.48, September/October 1984, p33.

⁶² LIVINGSTONE, R.B. *Kitaj*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p34.

⁶³ STEVEN CAMPBELL quoted in MORGAN, "Soup's On: An Audience with Stephen Campbell", p33.

Baxter and early Balthus on a *Boy's Life* junket to Fuseli-land?"⁶⁴ Certain similarities between Campbell and Beckman were also evident, as Campbell's commentary on contemporary events became increasingly oblique "tangles of myth, allegory, and dream."⁶⁵ It is, however, absurd to argue that Campbell simply abandoned his performance work in order to absorb Hyman and Moffat's thesis. In direct contrast, Campbell demonstrated that the application of pictorial 'languages' *necessitated* their extension; since all languages are 'impure', the procedures of 'narrative painting' must constantly mutate. By being restricted to paint as a medium, Campbell was ensured that his work would evoke a sense of his struggle to come to terms with an unfamiliar 'language'. Rather than a form of expressionism, this 'struggle' was a decidedly *staged* wrestling match with the archaic conventions of narrative painting, as Moffat later pointed out:

His monumental pictures - vivid in imagery, complex in detail and rich in formal invention - retain the device of the dramatically struck pose from his earlier performance works. Unlike the vast majority of New Painters, Campbell's work remains free of stylistic eclecticism or quotation and has never concerned itself with expressionist angst.⁶⁶

Campbell's art school performances invoked a conceptual approach to figuration, leading him to treating the image as a sign rather than as an expressive device.⁶⁷ Far from being Kitajesque exercises in draughtsmanship, his early paintings were designed to be read as frozen performances wherein the human figure, gesticulating, posing, sometimes over-acting, was arranged in Mannerist, balletic positions. "There is a tinge of Samuel Beckett in these absurdities, only Campbell isn't gloomy."⁶⁸ Indeed, by representing static 'situations' in the Hegelian sense of the word, Campbell encouraged viewers to recognise that the absurd cannot be represented or performed without resorting to cliché:

⁶⁴ BARRY YOUNGRAU, "Steven Campbell", *Arts Magazine*, January 1984, p10.

⁶⁵ This also differentiates Campbell from Hyman's implicit criteria that narrative painting "should be in some sense direct or 'naive' in its approach - that it should present an imaginative vision of life, rather than taking up a strategic position about art." HYMAN, "Another Branch of the Family", p5.

⁶⁶ ALEXANDER MOFFAT, "Telling Stories: A New Figuration in Glasgow 1980-85", *New Image Glasgow*, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1985, p6.

⁶⁷ "... 'imagination' is so subordinated by 'fancy' in Campbell that it is only perceptible, in the spirited rendering of the nickname marks, admissions of the contingent nature of signs. The unseating of imagination in the work is linked to the banishment of 'expressionism', still the accepted Modernist stance in his native Scotland." MORGAN, "Steven Campbell: The Case of the Wagging Leg", *Artforum*, December 1984, p60.

⁶⁸ LISA LIEBMANN, "Steven Campbell, Barbara Toll, New York, and John Weber Gallery, New York", *Artforum*, April 1984, p75.

First I did the drawings for the *Hiker's Ballet* and I thought it was a marvellous idea of a guy chasing a fern across a stage [trying to flatten it with his knapsack]. Every art 'performance' I've ever seen has always been boring. [...] So that's why I put a yawning child in it, to represent the way most people feel who go along to these things.⁶⁹

While the milieu in which performance might define itself is delineated in his paintings, Campbell's characters appeared incapable of initiating measures that impact upon and change their situations in any significant way. Where changes in situation did occur, landscape or buildings, rather than characters were represented as chief agents of change: "His men dressed as boys and his hikers with their cumbersome limbs travel through a world in which cause and effect have been turned topsy-turvy. The world of inanimate objects comes alive. In one painting a building accuses its architect of bad design, a hundred fingers pointing out from its bricks. In *Fern's Revenge* the unwitting hiker hurtles to destruction in a dried-up swimming pool, tripped by a vengeful fern."⁷⁰ In Campbell's paintings nothing ever turned out as we might expect; if his characters did not always fail or were not frustrated; most of their actions were futile, they were unable to achieve productiveness, break out of the vicious circle of their fate. In short they failed to become agents of history for themselves. They were blissfully isolated from historical reality appearing to know nothing of the world which has determined their destiny. Their only actions were things that related to the structure of the painting, which was therefore the very fabric of their perceived history.

Figure 10.6 Steven Campbell *Fern's Revenge*

On the other hand, it could be argued that the *implied* disappearance of authorial command over the work (what Campbell calls the product of "summing up mistakes") and the appearance of problematic and fragmentary narratives forced viewers to participate in the production as well as the interpretation of his opus. Their problem was not just one of inferring an interpretation from a sequence of motifs or descriptions of events that they understood, as they might have done with the work of



⁶⁹CAMPBELL quoted in PETER HILL, "Steven Campbell interviewed by Peter Hill, Watts Bar, Manhattan, December 1983", *Alba*, January 1984, p20.

⁷⁰ TONY GODFREY, "British Painting at the Cross-roads", *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1986, p99-100.

Conrad Atkinson, but of understanding exactly *what* was being represented - fitting actions and characters together in an intelligible narrative. We could, of course, maintain that what Campbell presented us with was no different from Atkinson's allegedly non-fictional discourse and try to preserve a communication model by showing how his art functioned according to the established (anti)conventions of late 1970s/early 1980s New Image painting. Alternatively, we could forsake such communication models, in view of the fact that there is little agreement about what 'conventions' mean. By completely denying the possibility of 'real' authors and viewers, Campbell effectively opted for the latter option. Again, the vital paradox which remained was that the 'bogus' Campbell who customarily spoke in interviews told the truth by revealing that everything is false.

On the one hand, by resisting the discursive logic of Art & Language and Terry Atkinson's post-conceptual painting in favour of the poetic a-logic of assonance, Campbell opened up new dimensions for post-conceptual artists of the late 80s. On the other hand, misunderstanding of Campbell's antics - in part a product of the late 70s Nude Review - may well have allowed the critical ascendancy of neo-conceptualism. The neither/nor, either/or rhetorical device has become a paramount and paradigmatic evasive formula, much like that found in many branches of religious mysticism.

CHAPTER 11

Reconsidering Theory

In 1974 no public gallery in London would accept an exhibition of 26 women conceptual artists, C7,500, selected by Lucy Lippard. In 1980 the ICA housed three major feminist exhibitions, a woman's film season, a series of panel discussions and a weekend conference *Questions on Woman's Art* involving artists from all these shows as well as those from the related venture *Eight Artists: Women: 1980* at the Acme gallery.¹

Women's Images of Men opened in October 1980 in a blaze of publicity. On average a thousand people a day came to see the work, breaking attendance records at the ICA as well as at each venue in the subsequent tour.²

Figurative work, they believed, would be above all accessible: To reach beyond, but including, the women's movement and the usual visitors to galleries was one of their major aims.³

Women's issues were taken up briefly last year and then dropped in favour of this year's topic, working-class art. Shouldn't both be vital and continuing areas of concern? Ironically the women's movement is still considered politically marginal at a time when most male practitioners of 'social purpose art; are political voyeurs, but most women artists have shared a grass-roots involvement in the Women's Movement, have felt their political commitments deeply and have fought for them daily in their personal lives.⁴

For many the debates surrounding the 'return to painting' in the late 1970s, were and remain an exclusively male affair. The denunciations of painting as a commodity and negatively gendered media, helped to continue the de-materialisation projects of the earlier 1970s. This view, however, is historically untenable given that the end of the 1970s also saw a number of women within conventional artworld circles becoming increasingly dissatisfied with radical academicism. Spence for one had certainly suggested a critique of Kelly's iconoclasm. Critical photographers' confrontation of pictorial rhetoric, and Spence's Barthesian interest in myth

¹ ROZSIKA PARKER, "Feminist Art Practices in Women's Images of Men, About Time and Issue", *Art Monthly*, No 43, 1981, p16.

²JACQUILINE MORREAU and CATHERINE ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", in SARAH KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Society, London, 1985, p13. The other venues were: The Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol; South Hill Park, Bracknell, Berkshire; The Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool; The University of Wales, Aberystwyth; The Third Eye Centre, Glasgow; and the Project Art Centre, Dublin.

³ PARKER, "Feminist Art Practices in Women's Images of Men, About Time and Issue", p16.

⁴ MARY KELLY, "The Crisis in Professionalism", *Studio International*, Volume 194 Number 989, 2/1978, p82.

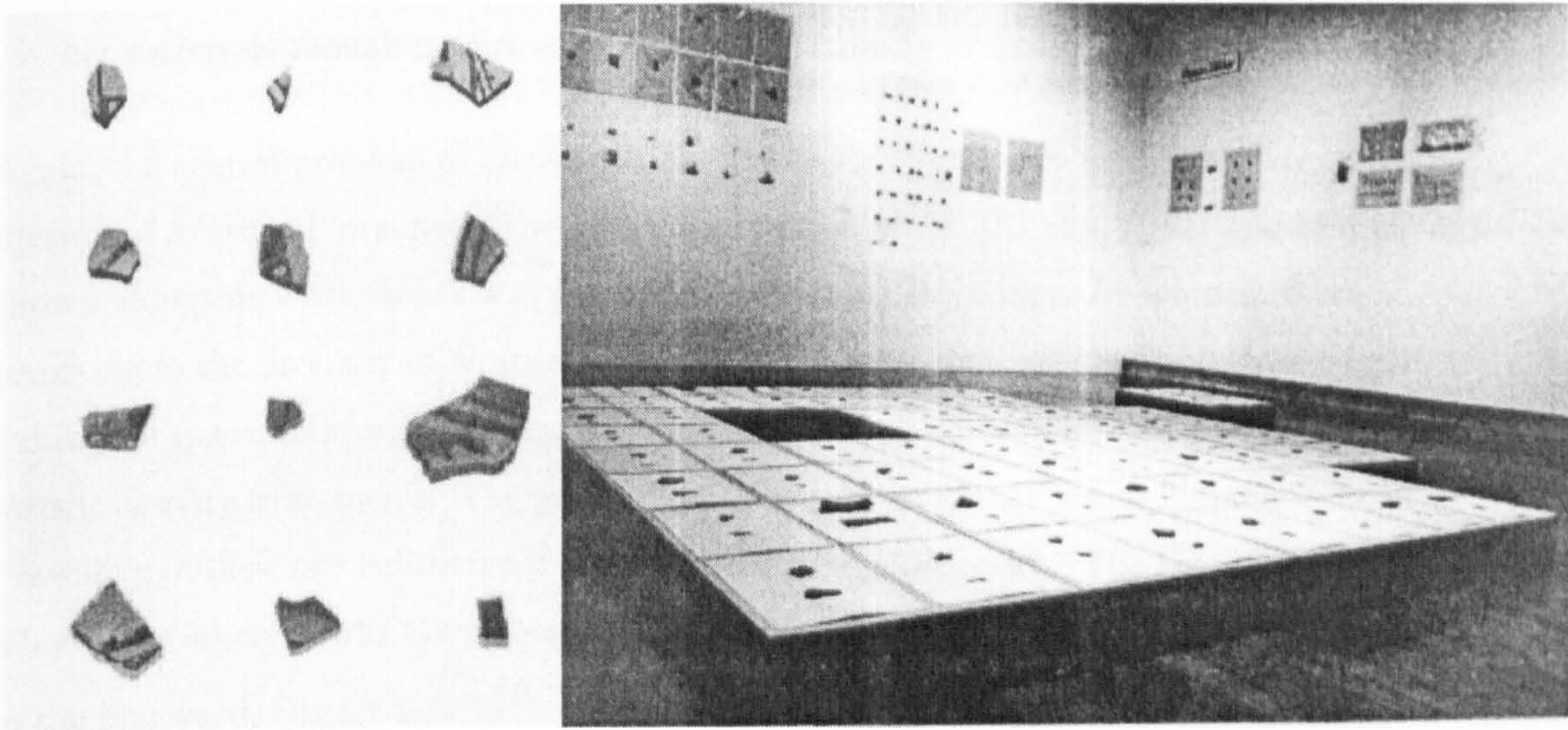
provided a ground for women's intervention in painting and more traditional forms of sculpture.

1978 Hayward Annual consolidated these views. Following a suggestion by Lucy Lippard, an entirely female jury chose the second Hayward Annual held in 1978. Unlike in the 1977 exhibition, the catalogue provided extensive information about the artists and their work, written by Sarah Kent who interviewed each artist. On the one hand the 78' Annual was notable for its extreme self-consciousness:

If the *Hayward Annual* of current British art was an 'art-political event' this second one should be still more so. While it is of course primarily an art show, it was also chosen with an overtly political goal in mind: to 'bring to the attention of the public the quality of the work of women artists in Britain in the context of a mixed show.'⁵

On the other hand it paralleled the *Art for Whom* ethic:

A national group show - if it is indeed a survey of the art being made rather than the art already being shown - should include artists of varied age, political and aesthetic persuasion, geographical location and - yes - sex and race. There should be something for everybody.⁶



Included were canonical 'feminist' works such as Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and Alexis Hunter's *Approach to Fear*. Susan Hiller's *Fragments* (1976-78) [Figures 11.1 (Detail) and 11.2 (Installation)] shared some similarities with the work of artists such as Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, both of whom would go on to achieve fame in the early 1980s as part of

⁵ LUCY R. LIPPARD, "The Anatomy of an Annual", *Hayward Annual '78*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, p1.

⁶ Ibid., p2.

the predominately male group of 'Lisson Group' of sculptors.⁷ Within the context of the 1978' Hayward Annual, these similarities were not noticed. Hiller, who trained as an anthropologist, used found artefacts as the raw materials for her artworks. Focusing her attention on broken pieces of pottery made by Pueblo Indian women, she sought to question cultural context, comparing her role as an artist with theirs. Such work had been underrated by anthropologists by being relegated to the status of 'craft'. Hiller pointed out that Pueblo women derived their ideas from an interaction between tradition and innovation, just as a contemporary Western fine artist might.

Curiously, the practices of artists within our own culture are rarely investigated by anthropologists, whose opinions may perpetuate certain assumptions derived from art-historical descriptions of the art of previous eras, which are then projected on to the situations of other societies.⁸

The dilemma with such work was that it recreated many of the problems associated with the 'universal intellectual', incorrectly implying that any examination of the givens of culture must arise from a sense of being outside it:

Hiller studied anthropology and so is able to turn her exclusion to advantage, studying her society as though it were some remote hill tribe.⁹

Again, the central problem of crisis criticism was being overlooked in an effort to retain the illusion of a 'critical' practice. The politically feminist work of Kelly, Hiller and Hunter was shown alongside work which was not feminist in intent, but simply *by* women, thereby testifying to the diversity of women's art. Each artist was separated off into their own exhibition space, reinforcing bourgeois notions of artistic autonomy, separating women's artistic activity from men's. The popular press responded in their usual flippant manner "revelling in their coy belittlement and safe humorous superiority - The Female Twist, Wayward Gallery, Girl's Own Annual, No Deadlier than the Male, Ladies First, Ladies Night at the Hayward, Distaff Side."¹⁰

Thus, as the event turned out, it was the locus of a conflict of expectations and had unexpected results. The art world saw a show by women artists initiated as part of a

⁷ See Chapter 15 Who am I? Where am I Going? How much will it Cost? Will I need any Luggage?

⁸ SUSAN HILLER, "Art and Anthropology / Anthropology and Art" (6th May 1977), reprinted in BARBARA EINZIG ed. *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, p209.

⁹ KENT, "Feminism and Decadence", *Artscribe*, No.47, July/August 1984, p57.

¹⁰ GRISELDA POLLOCK, "Femininity, Feminism and the Hayward Annual", *Feminist Review*, No.2, 1979, p43.

'feminist' inspired assault on the art establishment. Expecting the show therefore to be feminist, it experienced some relief when it was not so, which is evident in the reviews. It was after all 'no deadlier than the male'. Women's different situation in art practice was therefore obscured once again; women who did not rock the boat as expected were welcomed back as having offered a very good art exhibition. Feminists, on the other hand, saw an exhibition that did little more than show a few artists who happened to be born female, and their response was that of betrayal at a wasted opportunity, of criticism for failing to address political issues in the art selected, and attack on the organisers as band-wagon jumpers.¹¹

In all of this, it failed to be mentioned that the critique of domination and exploitation made by politically feminist artists such as Kelly might have been taken as an example of the misappropriation of theory, where its all-encompassing ambition actually mystifies the operations of specific oppression and detracts from the more focused argument. Certainly, in a number of postmodern summaries of such developments written since the mid-80s, the incorporation of theoretical discourse, and the playing between verbal and visual discourses was taken to exemplify not only *the* agenda to be followed by feminist artists, but also the *form*, suggesting that practice is simply scripted by theory, that work serves only to exemplify the master text.

...photographs have become something to which cultural and media studies make regular reference, but in this case the specificity of the *practices, genres and environments* of the medium has diluted into a concern with generalised systems of representation; photography appears as a fragmentary moment, a metaphor for a larger story such as the domination of culture by the visual.¹²

Coming to power in 1979, Margaret Thatcher proved that 'women' as ideological imperatives, could be as bullying, exclusionary and prescriptive - as materialistic and matriarchal - as any paternalists or patriarchs, and could certainly be more cruel, damaging, and blinkered. In a paternalistic last stand to the reactionary climate of 1980, the ICA staged *About Time*, an exhibition of women's video performance and installation, and *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists*, an international show chosen by Lucy Lippard. Both shows were largely continuous with the politicised forms of art politics explored in exhibitions organised in 1978 by Richard Cork. Like Cork, Lippard emerged as a critic by supporting the latest developments in conceptual art, before converting to endorse more 'socially purposeful' feminist and community art practices. While Cork, at the time, had largely ignored the contribution to political art made by women, Lippard had used it to give second wind to her critical career. The ICA at last was redressing the balance with a series of issue based shows

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² JESSICA EVANS, "Introduction", *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, River Oram Press, London, 1997, p18.

organised by women and containing work by women. It was, however, too late, unwittingly taking up where the crisis critics had failed:

The 'Issue' artists, armed with articulate jargon and backed, sometimes unwittingly, by strong Left theoretical positions, presented their socio-political *outreach* work as the new feminist dawn. Operating within a hierarchical scale of progress and correctness in women's art and a degree of cultural chauvinism (both tacitly endorsed by the ICA), they attempted to marginalise most other positions. Figurative painting and sculpture, female imagery, the female imagination and sensibility, subjectivity and expressiveness [...] were now regarded as inappropriate to the ideological cause and ten years out of date.¹³

Despite its merit, the curatorial stance taken by *Issue* had already received a bashing in the British art press. Being based in the USA, Lippard lacked a clear grasp of how her pet critical issues might have related *specifically* to the controversies that had arisen around the British Arts Council over the previous four years. Much of the rhetoric, therefore, seemed as idealist and outdated as the biological feminism that its producers attacked. The British based critics Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau, being more in tune with the prevalent spirit of reaction in Britain, were far more adept at responding to the critical opportunity offered to them by the ICA when they organised *Women's Images of Men*. By 1980 many people across the political spectrum - from the extreme right to the radical left - were tired of 'feminism'. The critiques of 'second generation' feminism that followed Thatcher's victory were as shallow and self-serving as her politics.

Mary Kelly made one of the most courageous feminist artworks of the decade. In images and texts *Post-Partum Document* studied her relationship with her son over the first six years of life, illustrating and extending Lacan's analysis of the negative position of women within the patriarchy. In its sophistication - both theoretically and formally - the work, however, spoke mainly to those to which it referred.¹⁴

Our [...] point was that a substantial group of women artists were using figuration and narrative to explore their ideas in highly personal ways; they were neither represented by the feminist avant-garde which like the male mainstream rejected figuration or by the more directly feminist artists.¹⁵

'New Image feminists' continued to produce within the vigorous political and theoretical debates created by the women's movement during the early 1970s, actively incorporating theory and reflection into their working processes. However, Post-painterly media - Text-as-

¹³ MONICA PETZAL, "Questions on Women's Art Conference", *Art Monthly*, Number 42, December/January 1980/81, p23.

¹⁴ KENT, "Scratching and Biting Savagery", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, p4.

¹⁵ MORREAU and ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, p13.

commentary, Text-as-object, and Photo-as-Text - were no longer intrinsic to the construction of 'feminist', as they had been succeeding Kelly's work. The results of this paradigm shift, were clearly visible in the practice of erstwhile semio-photographer Alexis Hunter:

[Hunter has] returned to painting, using it as a vehicle for virulent attacks on patriarchal values. *Considering Theory* (1982) shows a woman in mortal conflict with the phallic serpent that has been the instrument of her own downfall and the excuse for restricting her potential. The painting's title also encourages one to read it as an attack on the academicism that stifled individual expression throughout the 1970s and discouraged painting and sculpture.¹⁶

This encourages us to ascertain to what extent Hunter's paintings were a critique or a product of the ideology of expressive individualism long discredited by feminists and Marxists alike. On the one hand, her inclusion in *Women's Images of Men* was designed less to ensure a comprehensive account of women's representational art than it was to provide a polemic calling for its recognition as a *subversive* art practice. Although Hunter's figurative representations were celebrated as an art of desire and the unconscious which nonetheless interrogated the 'real', this was seen as a means to ask fundamental questions about the relationship of reality to unreality, self to not-self or Other and conscious to consciousness.

Concerted efforts were made to assert this claim by suggesting that the New Women's Image displaced the male New Image. By accusing the male New Image of infusing the market-place by transforming painting into a vacillating performance of vacuous motifs, it could be claimed that Hunter's paintings were part of a serious, and long-established critique of representation (e.g. Margaret Harrison's *Rape* of 1978):

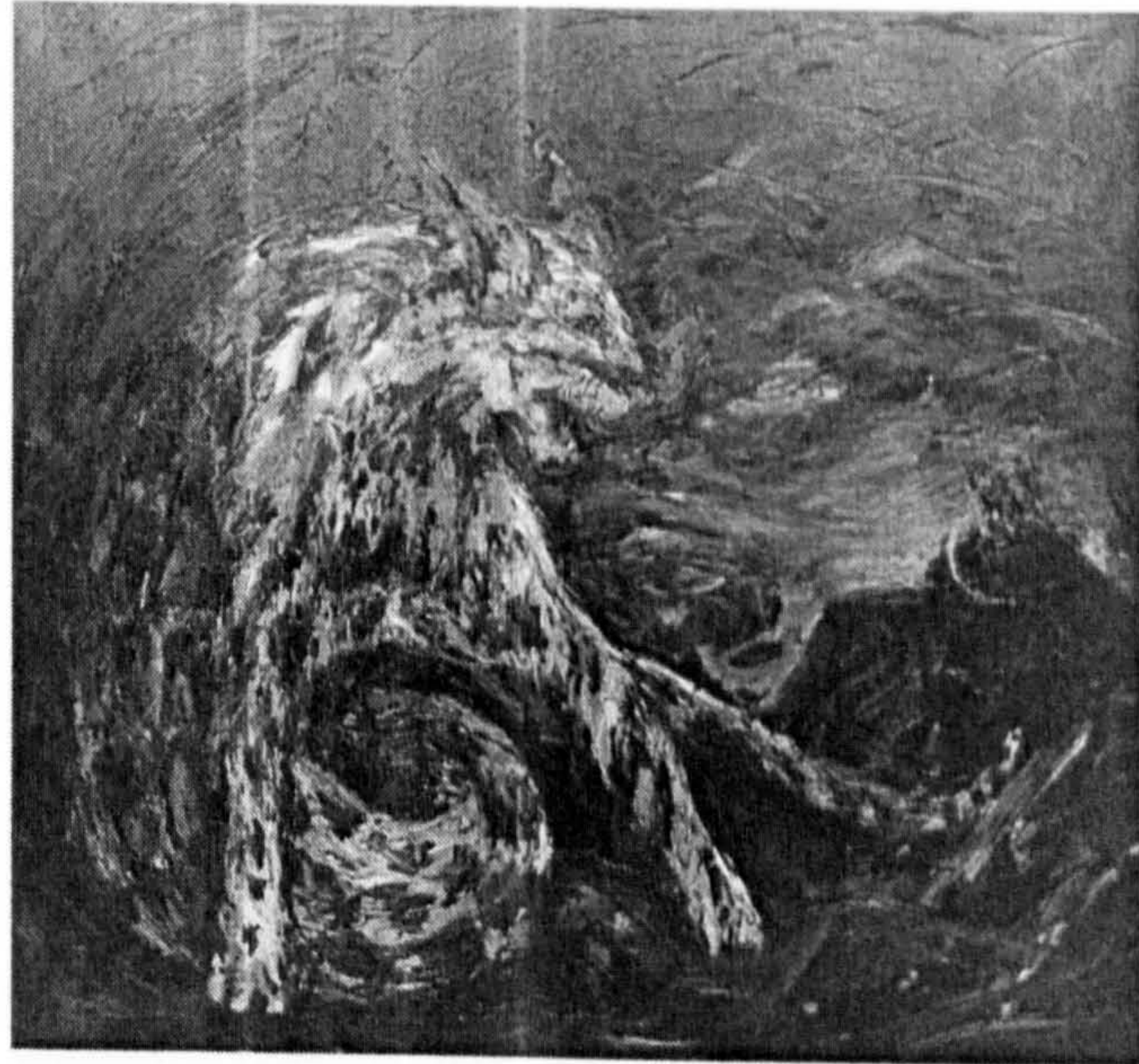
The exhibitions made a huge impact on the British art scene. It can be claimed that *Women's Images of Men* accelerated the adoption of the New Image as the new avant-garde.¹⁷ [...] New Image took from women's art a characteristic for which it has been condemned - eclecticism, previously known as plagiarism. But where women re-work old styles and traditional craft skills to project their ideas within a feminist framework, New Image indulges in aimless history-hopping or plunders popular culture for no particular purpose. [...] The failure of the New Image artists to say anything new confirms that women artists working with figuration and narrative are the true innovators of the 1980s.¹⁸

¹⁶ KENT, "Scratching and Biting Savagery", *Ibid.*, p4-6.

¹⁷ MORREAU and ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", *ibid.*, p24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p24-25.

Figure 11.3 Alexis Hunter, *Passionate Instincts VI*, (1983)



By establishing a critique of the character and politics of their representations with regard to feminist politics, narratives and myths, women were seen to have finally produced an *effective* set of feminist possibilities in art. For example, unlike the male New Image, it was claimed, Hunter did not create an alternative world, nor did she assert the purity of the medium. Instead

she aimed to articulate the void we experience when forced to confront the impossible, representing the unrealisable task of reversing her own cultural formation. As such, the women's New Image, succeeded in dissolving an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient.

The idea that feminism's greatest contribution to art was its lack of contribution to modernism is a tenuous claim, especially given its central role in the neo-modernist semio-art of the 1970s. Feminists may have greatly aided in the creation of 70s pluralism, but the very possibility of feminism existing as a political force would necessitate that it resist the absolute relativism this intimates. Hence, the idea that women were able to escape the linearism of the artworld is something of a myth. Rejection of the modernist canon required that it be substituted (or revised) by an inside view of the feminist artworld, a revisionist, alternative (yet equally canonical) herstory of art. As with art for society, the construction of this alternative history was Platonic. If Modernism was unilinear and conformist, made up of heroes, then feminist art would be excessively complex, made up of thousands of artists/groups and therefore too 'subversive' to be understood in modernist terms. (Of course, if feminism really were allowed to be the hybrid it was said to be, there would be little basis for its discussion.) Essentially, then, this was the self same Hegelianism which had driven the majority of Modernist accounts of history and cultural production.

In all, this raises the question of what constitutes 'subversion'. The subversive and by implication the revolutionary was simply identified as that which transgresses and contradicts the dominant ideological order. Moreover, it was effectively equated with misrule, chaos and unconscious irrationality. The irruption of the repressed is itself seen as a radical event leading to real social transformation. However, as Punk had already proven, the notion that resistance to social the order can be generated simply through the development of the 'negative', is one which presented no challenge to patriarchy in the double-think age of 'hip' monetarist Late

Capitalism.¹⁹ Indeed, like the 1978 Hayward Annual, *Women's Images of Men* was not repressively tolerated, but repressively celebrated. Once more, the “coy belittlement”²⁰ of the press signalled that it had not even been ‘subversive’ enough to encourage the conservative backlash which met the Tate Bricks, or the moral panic which followed in the wake of *Prostitution*. Had this been the case, the Thatcher Government would have been eager to capitalise, by threatening the artworld with public expenditure cuts designed to gain support for its (at this stage unpopular and unsuccessful) monetarist policies. ‘Subversively’ speaking, *Women's Images of Men* was not so much an insurrection of the artworld, as a cautious attempt to modernise it.

There was a more substantial danger for women in equating them with the unconscious and irrational. This continues to identify women as they are in the dominant culture, with art and irrationalism. Women, in other words, are illogical. This view was inadvertently encouraged. Following the crisis critics, *Women's Images of Men* suggested that practice and debates concerning representation, agency etc. were so abstruse as to be irrelevant to most people's lives. Excessive theoretical consideration missed the urgency of the role the women could perform in the visual arts. Like Burgin, 80s New Image feminists such as Hunter wished to *act*. However, on this occasion there was no call for ‘feminist’ art practice to become “a matter of practical work in semiotics”,²¹ simply the assertion that it should be practical work by *women*. All too often theory had been dragged into women's art at the last minute, a theoretical adjunct to ‘reading’ practice which continues in modernist modes as explorations of the body of ‘universal’ woman / radical woman painter. Kristeva has been used as a new means to argue a ‘feminist’ case for value in the feminine, in women's already over determined position as ‘Other’ and as an attempt to radicalise any mark of feminine difference. As such painting for women

tended to be reclaimed in *opposition* to claims for art's cognitive significance. The result, in a number of instances, is women artists identifying their painting with a repressed, intuitive, feminine Other.²²

Hunter's claim that she returned to painting because it allowed her to speak outside the constraints of theory, implicitly equated a lack of theoretical competence with female

¹⁹ See Chapter 14 Decline of the English Avant-Garde

²⁰ GRISELDA POLLOCK, “Femininity, Feminism and the Hayward Annual”, *Feminist Review*, No.2, 1979, p43.

²¹ VICTOR BURGIN, “Introduction”, *Two Essays on Art Photography and Semiotics*, Robert Self Publications, 1976, p2.

²² JOHN ROBERTS, “Painting and Sexual Difference”, *Postmodernism, politics and art*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p166.

creativity. The consequence of this was the general emergence within women's painting of self-validating female consciousness. The avoidance of questions on the adequacy of inadequacy of theories is defended on the grounds that objective knowledge is male subjectivity. Of course, given that representation must function in some manner, it must be possible to exhibit ways in which it functions. As such, claims that the new image feminism exercised a different class of pictorial logic, which resisted our desire to determine the recognisable ways in which it operates, provided no justification to cognise its existence. Like the Burginian politics of representation to which it was partially opposed, the new image feminism ultimately refused to admit the contingency of *its own* rhetoric. A corollary of this was that it helped to bestow the appearance of complexity upon the writings of its critical apologists. Given that the majority of the new female painters refused to frame the discussion of their work in all-encompassing theatricality, it is hardly surprising that critics began to defend their work with texts which might well have been mistaken for Peter Fuller's brand of mysticcriticism. Replacing the allegedly detached project of the politics of representation with a more politically engaged form of mysticcriticism gave certain feminist painters a competitive advantage, the indeterminate rhetorical devices used by their defenders ensuring that the central arguments supporting their work could not be easily located, a vantage point in any debate. Objectors to the new 'feminist' painting could be treated as naive believers who must be denounced. As such, the new image feminism could be seen as an example of the 'will to power', given that the logic of the deconstructive methodology was 'convincing' to many:

The women returned the gaze that usually turned on them and refused to be objectified. It was a subversive act. In Lisa Tickner's words, 'How threatening, how disruptive, to return to the scrutiny; to attempt at least to stay author of one's own look; coolly to appraise the male not just in himself, but as a bearer, rather than a maker of significance.'²³

Again the question arises of what, exactly, constitutes 'subversion'. *How* threatening or disruptive was it to oppose the "makers of significance" (i.e. men) by mirroring their production? Was work "providing a far-ranging appraisal of women's experience of patriarchal society [...] viewed entirely mistakenly as a querulous demand for role reversal"?²⁴ In which senses did the show deconstruct the circumstances of patriarchy given that Theory was no longer deemed of primary importance? Did women artists simply need *publicity*, how could they be political without paying attention to rhetoric?

Much of the work [included in *Women's Images of Men*] was neither sophisticated formally nor theoretically yet, ironically, it succeeded where radical art had failed in

²³ PARKER, "Feminist Art Practices in Women's Images of Men, About Time and Issue", p16.

²⁴ Ibid.

capturing the attention and channelling the rage of the general public both male and female. [...] And although much of the work was politically naive, the exhibition could, ironically, be said to have greater political impact than all the theoretically sophisticated, 'alternative' manifestations put together.²⁵

This clearly rejected the structuralist critique of the assumption that political content can exist without form and vice-versa. The populist claim that political impact is measured in attendance figures mirrors the Thatcherite gerrymandered confusion between critical success and statistical success that had become common by the mid-1980s. There were, however, claims that the publicity that arose from the New Image feminism "was itself illuminating":

Critical discourse worked to contain the discomfort provoked by the show. On the one hand it was entirely denied - the exhibition was 'fair', 'interesting', 'not particularly Amazonian', even highly flattering to the male ego. In other words it was seen to conform comfortably to the feminine stereotype. But the exhibition was often characterised as the aggressive outpourings of unrepresentative neurotics: an endeavour 'sabotaged by anger'. It was seen to conform to the feminist stereotype - ugly and extremist, able to be dismissed and denigrated.²⁶

In the context of these responses, the show could be celebrated as providing a barometer of patriarchy, highlighting the media's ability to assimilate or negate critique of its patriarchal values. It could not, however, be seen as a subversive strategy. The press had not been infiltrated, they had effortlessly transformed the event into spectacle. Indeed, as we have seen, the organiser's understanding of 'subversion' actively encouraged the identification of women with irrationalism.

The reception of the exhibition indicates why some feminists consider that introducing novel content is in itself insufficient. For example, somewhat bitter experiences have shown feminists that so called 'positive images of women', though an important means of consciousness raising among women, have not been able to radically challenge the narrow meanings and connotations of 'woman' in art. Because meanings depend on how the art is seen, from what ideological position it is received, the most decisively feminist image of a woman can be recuperated as body, as nature, as object for male possession.²⁷

²⁵ KENT, "Scratching and Biting Savagery", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, p8. Kent exaggerates the *political* impact of the exhibition. It is true to say that it had created interest in the press and as a result achieved awareness of women's art among the public. However, by 1980, the press had grown weary of making capital out of contemporary art. *Women's Images of Men* appealed to them simply because it was novel, enabling them to ridicule both art and women. In no sense was the exhibition seen as an attack on the sanctity of art, it simply wasn't taken seriously enough by the patriarchal press.

²⁶ PARKER, "Feminist Art Practices in Women's Images of Men, About Time and Issue", p16. Parker's view is more representative of the reception of the exhibition. Note that the 'arguments' she cites are not 'but is it art?' clichés, but questions regarding the motivation behind the pictures' contents. Again, this suggests that the work was not seen as a threat to the status of 'art', but rather as a threat to male values of aesthetic beauty and feminine decorum.

²⁷ Ibid., p17.

The ICA season not only gave confidence to individual artists, but encouraged dealers and exhibition organisers to promote women's work.²⁸

While 'women' were certainly better able to progress in their careers as professional artists, it is important to remember Walter Benjamin's caveat that to give the 'masses' an opportunity for self-expression without a corresponding economic and social equity is a characteristic of fascism. The passion for 'diversity' manifested in exhibitions such as the 1978 Hayward Annual and *Women's Images of Men* was dramatically at odds with and accompanied increasingly harsh governmental policies towards the culturally disenfranchised, who tended to be the very groups that art institutions championed at the representational level.

At what cost was the ICA show's success? Was it acceptable for women artists to become more prominent after severely compromising their work? Kent's quest for critical acclaim for female artists was often indistinguishable from the quest for commercial success, for "Honour, Power and the Love of Women". A fact never pointed out by feminist critiques of the show was that, two years earlier, Kent had staged an exhibition of Allen Jones' fetishistic paintings at the ICA. Anger at the content of Jones' work led to a tit-for-tat proposal that women should be given an opportunity to present *their* images of men. Thus, protest, in part generated by Kent *towards her own exhibition*, provided the impetus for another show organised by Kent.²⁹ There is little doubt that much of the outraged response to Jones' sado-masochistic work, (then a hot favourite among the more liberal arthouse milieu of punk,) was genuine. Kent's response, however, reeked of the worst excesses of 1970s artworld careerism. The desire for women to accomplish the highest level of achievement clearly exploited the long discredited notion of 'generic woman'. For Kent to claim that women suffer artistically *as* women more acutely than they suffer under other denominators that mark them as socially 'less than' or threatening - or that artist's primary allegiance should be as a woman in solidarity with other women - was inherently conservative, appertaining to the modernist and romantic fantasy of total self-expression, and the signification of the gesture as a mark of the painter's presence upon which many anti-painting arguments have been constructed. Kent's pro-active feminism was bound to be acceptable to the British art establishment since its basis was compatible with Thatcherite social Darwinism.³⁰

28 KENT, "Scratching and Biting Savagery", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, p8.

29 TAM GILES, "Women's Images of Men", *Art Monthly*, Number 42, December/January 1980/81, p19.

30 "I will support the effort of any woman to define herself through her production because I know how much more difficult it is. But I cannot support all work because a woman did it. People say to me there aren't any more big star women artists. If I had a choice - and most women in the artworld are appalled when I say this - between having three more women art stars who spend all the money at Georgette Clinger and Bloomingdales and health care for 400 women in the South Bronx I would pick the latter.

To attack the canon by promoting the generically 'female' risked the claim to be culturally pure, to attempt to define limits. Having said this, if we cannot define limits (since everything is aesthetic there is no 'real' difference to speak of), society would be destined to become increasingly conformist. Pushed to an extreme, liberalism might deny difference. *Women's Images of Men* could, therefore, be a justifiable cultural intervention only in so far as it extended the debate by taking it into the (male capitalist) marketplace:

Lisa Milroy's rapid rise to attention would have been unthinkable five years ago, especially given her subject matter - items of household use or of dress that would no doubt have been denounced as 'feminine' or 'domestic'. Amanda Faulkner's confrontative women would doubtlessly have provoked anger rather than delight. Therese Outlon's ambitious and elegiac landscapes would probably have passed unnoticed or even gone unmade.³¹

What is appalling to me is the idea of women within the artworld, entering the market, doing work, and not concerned with what we are, and how we have to struggle." BARBARA KRUGER, "Barbara Kruger interviewed by John Roberts", *Art Monthly*, Dec/Jan 1983/4. Number 72, p18.

³¹KENT, "Scratching and Biting Savagery", in KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, p10.

CHAPTER 12

Schooling London

It is ironic that it was in the heyday of conceptual art that angry demands for a return in art to human concerns should have reached their most vociferous, since this art, with its often provocative insistence on narrative and emotional subject-matter (by contrast with abstraction and Minimal art) was itself a symptom of the return to the figurative that we are experiencing now. It is always likely, therefore, that without interference from art institutions the deficiencies of one phase of art will be redressed by the next. But again, what, meanwhile, is to be the fate of the finest art on which the community's sun does not shine? Are switchback rides or dramatically cyclical patterns desirable, or even, in fact, necessary?¹

On the crest of this 'new wave' bobs a very familiar, large, discarded cork.²

I was interested myself in people like Auerbach and Bacon. Peter came to the School of London during a time in which they were very well established. So I didn't see them as tainted by Peter, but I thought that it was unfortunate that their work was being perceived by young people as an illustration of what Peter was trying to do.³

..the artists, museum people, the public, the dealers protested. They didn't like this suppression of the essential values of art as they had been developed over the centuries and are now coming back in an explosive way.⁴

In his introduction to *The Human Clay* in 1976, Kitaj had coined the term, the 'School of London', for Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Howard Hodgkin and Leon Kossoff. Observing links between their figurative approaches, Kitaj hoped that this group would become a 'potent' force, and would develop into something comparable to Dickens and T. S. Eliot. A difficult concept to grasp, given the variable characteristics of the artists involved, Kitaj here made the observation that this 'School' was in part defined by a monastic attitude:

Bacon has been painting in the same room for over thirty years a room so tiny it would fit in Julian Schnabel's bathroom. Freud and Kossoff and Auerbach have been in the same small rooms for years, working and working rarely stopping. Auerbach's studio looks like a dungeon. They hardly leave London. I don't think they ever cross London.⁵

¹ RICHARD MORPHET, "A Curatorial View", *The Hard-Won Image: Traditional Method and Subject in Recent British Art*, The Tate Gallery, Millbank, London, 4th July-9th September 1984, p46.

² PETER FULLER, "On Social Functionalism", *Artscribe*, No.13, August 1978, p43.

³ Interview with RICHARD CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

⁴ CHRISTOS JOACHIMEDES, "How They Got it [A New Spirit in Painting] Together", *Art Monthly*, Number 43, February 1981, p4.

⁵ R.B. KITAJ, *The Human Clay*, Hayward Gallery, Arts Council 1976.

In 1977, the majority of critics were despondent of the kind of art which Kitaj and Hockney were promoting. Peter Fuller, was typically dismissive, remarking that much of *The Human Clay* show “consisted of images by sweaty life-class traditionalists, those who still wear Euston Road spectacles...”⁶ Less than three years later, however, Fuller was *the* most ardent among an army of critics who held the School of London and the inheritors of the “Bomberg tradition”⁷ to be the most accomplished artists in the Western world.

I think that more and more of us are coming to realise that artists like Warhol, Hamilton, Victor Burgin, Mary Kelly, Atkinson, Willats, etc, were just decadent stylists of Late Modernism. The art of recent years which has the greatest *radical* significance by contrast often has no immediate political content or context. Furthermore, it contains many stylistically conservative elements – such as a commitment to one of the traditional material practices, painting, sculpture, or drawing. The art of the seventies which the left should defend includes, in my view, works by Creffield, Kossoff, Auerbach, Kitaj, the Wimbledon sculptors, De Francia, and yes, even Hoyland at his best.⁸

The catalysts for this critical shift were numerous. Fuller’s close involvement with John Tagg, Andrew Brighton and Richard Cork saw him launch comparable attacks on modernism, and the controversies concerning the Arts Council’s relationship with the political avant-garde. Unlike his fellow crisis critics, however, Fuller was something of a mongrel convert to populism. While studying at Peterhouse, Cambridge in the late 1960s, the influence of Walter Benjamin and John Berger⁹ led him to attempt to formulate a series of ‘Marxist’ theories of expression:

I reject the idea that there is such a thing as a “science of aesthetics”, or a legitimate method of “formal” analysis which can lead a critic to the identification of “objective”, “permanent”, “culture free”, universal” or “fundamental” aesthetic attributes within a given work of art. [...] Things in the world are without meaning, or signification, or visual relations between their component parts, or “formal” or aesthetic value. [...] ...my consciousness and the consciousness of all the other viewers of the work are not identical or fixed. Consciousness is determined by history.¹⁰

Although Fuller claimed to remain congenial towards Marxism during the late 70s, it was during the period that he began to experience a “growing dissatisfaction with the aridity of

⁶ FULLER, “The Crisis in British Art”, *Art Monthly*, Number 8, June 1977, p 8.

⁷ FULLER, “Towards a Theory of Expression”, *Art Monthly*, Number 36, May 1980, p5.

⁸ Ibid. p6.

⁹ See FULLER. “William Morris”, *Art Monthly*, Number 46, May 1981, p12-16.

¹⁰ FULLER, “Problems of Art Criticism”, in BRANDON TAYLOR, *Art and Criticism : A Symposium Held at Winchester School of Art 1976*, Winchester School of Art Press, 1979, p22-23.

much of the current left debate about the visual arts.”¹¹ Unlike the New Right, Fuller was interested in rescuing the emancipatory view of the aesthetic rather than *simply* with the finding somewhere to shift the uncomfortable burdens of capitalism.¹² Fuller’s peculiarly narrow reading (limited to one point) of Herbert Marcuse, led him to believe not only that an aesthetic dimension was exempt from the distortions of capitalism, but that it was the potential saviour of repressed and oppressed consciousness. As such he began to endeavour to redress the problem raised by Marx in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1857), namely, the dialectic between socio-ideological interpretations of art and the seemingly constant appeal that persists in artworks, despite transformations in historical or ideological structures. This aspiration formed the mainstay of Fuller’s three collections of writings *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1980), *Beyond the Crisis in Art* (1980), *Seeing Berger - A Revaluation* (1980).

The writings of Raymond Williams, Perry Anderson, Edward Thompson, Sebastiano Timpanaro and William Morris on the subject of Marxism had a particularly strong influence on Fuller’s revisionism during this period.¹³ Following Timpanaro’s *On Materialism* (1975)¹⁴, Fuller came to believe that there were “enduring representations” in art - such as images that pertain to birth, reproduction, love and death, possessing a more or less constant appeal for biological reasons:

I have found myself forming the view that a central flaw within classical Marxism was its lack of any adequate conception of man’s relationship to nature, indeed of man, not as an ideological entity, but as a specific species, limited by a relatively constant, underlying biological condition, dependent upon natural processes and a natural world he cannot command.¹⁵

Fuller quickly ushered in a ‘renaissance’ of art’s essential features, namely the much questioned categories of “the human condition”, “psycho-biological expression” and “authenticity”.

¹¹FULLER, “Preface”, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Limited, London, 1980, p242.

¹²The general emphasis of Fuller’s argument had, at this point, much in common with JURGEN HABERMAS’ “Modernity - An Incomplete Project”, reprinted in HAL FOSTER, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The Bay Press, USA 1983, p3-16.

¹³See SEBASTIANO TIMPANARO, “The Freudian Slip”, *New Left Review*, Number 91, May-June 1972, p43-56, CHARLES RYCROFT, “Review: Freud and Timpanaro’s *Freudian Slip*”, *New Left Review*, Number 118, November-December 1979, p81-88 and RAYMOND WILLIAMS, “Problems of Materialism [Sebastiano Timpanaro]”, *New Left Review*, Number 109, May-June 1978, p3-18.

¹⁴ “...as the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro puts it, ‘a man as a biological being has remained essentially unchanged from the beginnings of civilisation to the present; and those sentiments and representations which are closest to the biological facts of human existence have changed very little.’ FULLER, “Towards a Theory of Expression”, p4.

¹⁵FULLER, “In Defence of Art” (1979), *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Limited, London, 1980, p242.

Although Fuller continued to ally these 'permanent' values with contingent values, he nonetheless made them seem contradictory, in order to place greatest emphasis on the transcendental. Given his devotion to biological reductionism¹⁶, it would appear rather ironic for Fuller to have criticised "much officially sponsored art practice, an influential school of art history, and a great deal of art criticism," on the grounds that it tended to reduce art to ideology, *tout court*.¹⁷ Fuller regarded critical postmodernists and Marxist critics such as Berger, Terry Eagleton, Tim Clark, and Griselda Pollock as a puritanical moralising clerisy who virtually policed the artworld in the name of a postmodern Trinity of 'race, class and gender', turning the emancipatory impulse of the sixties and early seventies inside out. What Fuller believed amounted to a philistine fear of art, perpetrated under a false rhetoric of care and defence of the marginalized, was seen to dominate everything this oxymoronic 'radical orthodoxy' touched. Thoroughly disenchanted with the Left's miasmic touch, Fuller joined with Cork, Brighton, and Tagg in announcing a crisis in art.

As early as 1976, however, the career-minded Fuller was sagacious enough to state that his emphasis was distinct from the Marxist principles of the core group of crisis critics; indeed one of his prevalent critical pursuits was soon to become maligning the politicisation which critical postmodernist practices and debates had encouraged.¹⁸ The development of Fuller's ideas in this period has to be seen against the context of the changes in the art press. Brighton claims that he and Fuller invited John Tagg to join them in dominating *Studio International* for left-wing art criticism, Fuller taking advantage of his Cambridge connection.¹⁹ Quickly and

¹⁶ See FULLER, "Towards a Theory of Expression", and FULLER "Art and Biology [following Sebastiano Timpanaro]", *New Left Review*, Number 132, March-April 1982, p83-96. In many ways Fuller can be seen to have clumsily revived something similar to the essentialist biocriticism practised by many feminist artists and critics in the early 70s as a replacement for formalism. For example in "Female Imagery" *Womanspace Journal*, I, Summer 1973, p11-14, Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago claimed to be able to recognise female "central core" imagery in art by women. The influence of this view can also be located in Sarah Kent's criticism of the mid-1970s: "I look forward to the time when it will be possible to discuss the feminine qualities of a woman's work without this being rejected as a patronising approach. I believe that such qualities not only exist, but also manifest themselves despite attempts to suppress them. I admire many women artists, and the qualities that I appreciate in their work I would unhesitatingly describe as feminine. [...] Women must acknowledge their inner strength and potential as female artists, and learn to sustain their energies not through anger, resentment or rivalry, but through an inner confidence in the value of their *feminine* contribution." SARAH KENT, "Engendering Self Respect", *Studio International*, March 1977, p196. This, of course, was precisely the form of simplistic, conservative, 'feminine' feminism which the new art historians and critical photographers of the later 70s reacted against. For a discussion of feminist biocriticism see BARBARA ROSE, "Vaginal Iconology", *New York Magazine*, VII, 11th February 1974.

¹⁷ FULLER, *Seeing Berger- A Revaluation*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Limited, London, 1980, republished in *Seeing Through Berger*, The Claridge Press, London, 1988, p15.

¹⁸ "...my emphasis is distinct from that of Richard Cork; the differences between us are as significant as the areas of agreement." FULLER, "Problems of Art Criticism", p22.

¹⁹ "Peter was somebody that I'd known on and off, not since I was at Cambridge, I never actually met him at Cambridge, but what I did do, oddly enough was write a review, one of the first reviews I ever

ruthlessly taking advantage of the hole for expansion in the art press, Fuller launched his bid for critical supremacy in 1978, turning against Cork by writing disparagingly of the “‘Social Functionalism’ [that] has been infecting the fringes of art institutions, and looks set soon to flood its citadels as well”, while declaring his decision “to throw myself in front of the wheels to impede the bandwagon’s progress, rather than to climb on board for what looks like an easy, if at times rather bumpy, ride”.²⁰ Fuller, then, went further, manufacturing a crisis in ‘crisis criticism’:

At a party, not 18 months ago, Cork was said to have surprised his listeners by wondering aloud what would come next after political art. Perhaps, with the change of government this has become *the* urgent question for him. For, in the end, Cork has shown himself to be a critic who floats without direction, according to the ebbing of the mainstream. But even his buoyancy is more like that of a sponge: soaking up an eddying ocean around him, his theory of art is as fluid and vacuous as his theory of politics; he accretes from the writings of others without developing a theoretical spine of his own.²¹

Having himself made more changes over the past four years than David Bowie, Fuller’s hypocrisy knew no bounds. He was, however, far from alone in his careerist chameleon arriere-gardism. At the end of the 1970s the Arts Council increasingly began to negate its responsibility as an arbiter and defender of artistic value. In part, this was a response to the incriminations of paternalism, elitism and obscenity that it had suffered throughout the seventies. On the other hand, Conrad Atkinson claimed, abdicating responsibility in this manner was designed to appease an incoming Conservative government²²: “the expansion of the Arts Council’s touring exhibitions (which are easier and cheaper for a regional centre to mount than the ones they could create for themselves)” indicates the arrival of “a state

wrote, which was of Peter’s paintings at the Cambridge Union! They were strangely expressionist, well maybe not so strange in view of what he finally ended up writing, on people like Kossoff. When I knew him in the 70s for quite a long time, he seemed to be very much in favour of the kind of art that I was interested in. I remember in particular organising a show called Critics Choice at the Tooth Gallery with a lot of *Beyond Painting and Sculpture* kind of artists and he wrote a very supportive review. I only really got to know him when I asked him to write for *Studio*, and he was very keen and I realised that he was a writer of talent who could benefit from being given his head. But up until that point we hadn’t know each other at all well. We met occasionally, but I never found him an easy person to get to know. He always seemed to be kind of mysterious.” Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

²⁰FULLER, “On Social Functionalism”, p43.

²¹JOHN TAGG & FULLER, “Richard Cork and the ‘New Road to Wigan Pier’”, *Art Monthly*, No.30, 1979, p7.

²² “A short lived economic boom during the 1980s resulted in more funds for the Arts Council and a surge in the art market, but on whole the decade was not a favourable one for radical artists, especially those associated with critical, libertarian movements of the 1960s.” JOHN A. WALKER, “Early 1980s” *John Latham*, Middlesex University Press, 1995, p139.

patronage bureaucracy of the utmost timidity and inflexibility.”²³ An example of the Arts Council’s “timidity” arose in 1979 when four artists were invited to make separate choices for the Hayward Annual.²⁴ This was intended to avoid the problems associated with working as a committee, the lack of committee meaning that there was no need to agree, a decision made directly against the more democratic grain of the previous exhibition:²⁵

...the art world thrives on small groups of like-minded people supporting each other against the odds and conspiracy theory fits with art history. The exhibition is therefore a group of smaller exhibitions each containing small one-man shows. Although the artists are shown separately, most within the selector’s group know each other and therefore contribute to the statement made by that group.²⁶

John McEwan complained that “artists are the worst people to select art”, since “they grab one slot for themselves and divide what remains between friends”.²⁷ Allowing *some* of the main players in the British (read London) artworld to ‘represent themselves’ played along with Thatcher’s policy on reducing the role of government. The democratic process was merely

²³CONRAD ATKINSON, “Correspondence: ‘Lives’ Lives”, *Art Monthly*, No. 27, 1979, p28.

“Between 1980 and 1981, according to the ACGB’s inflation-adjusted figures, Grant-in-aid from central government fell from £27,034,000 to £26,130,000. ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN, *Critical Judgements: Thirty-sixth annual report and accounts*, 1980/81, ACGB, London, p42. Cuts were therefore made in this period. However, Grant-in-aid from central government *rose* in the 1980s. “At face value, there has been a substantial increase in the real value of central government expenditure on the arts and museums during the 1980s. [...] At constant prices (deflated by the GDP deflator), the growth in arts and museum revenue expenditure is impressive, increasing by over 48 per cent over the period. However, part of this increase up to 1987/8 does not represent an increased financial commitment to the arts and museums, but instead reflects changes in the structure of funding at central and local government levels. The removal of a tier of local government, with the abolition of the metropolitan counties and the GLC, brought additional financial responsibilities on central government. [...] However, even allowing for the effects of replacement funding following the abolition of the GLC and the metropolitan counties in 1986, the transfer of responsibility of the Natural History Museum to the OAL, an inflation as measured by the GDP deflator, government revenue expenditure on the arts and museums has increased by 22 per cent, much of this occurring in the period 1978/9 to 1984/5.” ANDREW FEIST AND ROBERT HUTCHESON, eds. “Central Government”, *Cultural Trends in the Eighties*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1990, p9.

²⁴ Conrad Atkinson’s complaints about the selection process for this show may well rise from the fact the his voice was not being heard for once: “Clearly, in these lean times, some artists are jammier than others. Margaret Harrison received two of her three GLAA awards, 79/80 and 80/81, during her husband’s (Conrad Atkinson) spell on the GLAA panel. MICHAEL DALEY, “Arts Council Awards”, *Art Monthly*, Number 49, September 1981, p32.

²⁵See Chapter 11 Reconsidering Theory for a short account of the controversy surrounding the 1978 Hayward Annual.

²⁶RICHARD FRANCIS, “Preface”, *Hayward Annual 1979*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, 19 July - 27 August 1979, p6.

²⁷JOHN McEWEN, “Southbank Summer: The Hayward Annual”, *Art Monthly*, No. 29, September 1979, p10.

simulated in order to disguise a network of incestuous power relationships. The will to avoid bureaucratic curatorial interference was patently *signified* by (again) boxing off exhibits from one another, relating them to one another only in the catalogue. Helen Chadwick chose to exhibit installations by Bruce McLean, Genesis P-Orridge, Tony Sinden and, Jim Whitington:

Many artists have chosen to move away from the gallery as the predetermining place in which to exhibit. Other spheres have become appropriate as the work demands more suitable situations in which to operate: sculpture and performance for the theatre, music with gigs as venues, carnivals and festivals, the mail. This increased accessibility facilitates an exchange which is more social and at best less elitist.²⁸

The inclusion of P-Orridge seemed brave and magnanimous, especially given that he had been banned from virtually every gallery in the country. Of course, the idea this was anything other than the recurrently elitist selection process was highly questionable given that Chadwick had long been a neighbour of P-Orridge in Martello Street, then something of an artists' ghetto in Hackney. The equally nepotistic James Faure Walker took the opportunity to promote the "Artscribe faction",²⁹ while the figurative reaction initiated by Kitaj in 1976 flexed its muscles as Paul Chowdhury included himself alongside representational oil painters such as Euan Uglow and Leon Kossoff. This prompted the following breed of response from *arriere-garde* critics:

Cynics would be forgiven for concluding that the whole [Arts Panel] operation is a kind of ritual dance in which partners occasionally change positions but no one ever leaves the floor. The 1978/9 major [Arts Council of Great Britain] awards and bursaries present a useful example: two of the three £6000 bursaries and nine of the sixteen £2000 awards went to conceptualists or performance artists. The remaining winners were all of the most narrow minimalist species of abstraction. Not a single figurative artist received an award. Out of the total of nineteen winners, no fewer than eight were associated with one of the three London avant-garde galleries, the Lisson, the Robert Self and the Acme (which is one of the Council's own galleries).³⁰

While it is true that figurative painters continued to be shunned by *some* members of the ACGB between 1975 and 1980, examination of the ACGB's annual reports and accounts over the period reveals that traditional art forms generally received by far the bulk of funding both in terms of exhibitions and artists bursaries. Without galleries such as the Lisson and Robert Self it is doubtful if artists working in non-traditional media would have survived beyond Richard Cork's tenure on the ACGB's exhibition sub-committee. By 1980, however, non-conventional media received even less public funding precisely because of grossly misleading protestations from ill-informed conservatives such as Daley.

²⁸HELEN CHADWICK, *Hayward Annual* 1979, p13.

²⁹JOHN McEWEN, "Southbank Summer", p10.

³⁰JANET DALEY, "The Arts Council vs. The Visual Arts", *The Literary Review*, October 1981, p41.

Hence, despite the attempt to retain a fairly comprehensive curatorial cross section in the 1979 Hayward Annual, Chowdhury's personal view of British art quickly mutated into a "representative slice"³¹ of late 70s art in Britain, as his choices recurred in the first British Art Show curated by William Packer, art critic for the *Financial Times*. The exhibition - which opened at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield (1st December 1979 - 27th January 1980) and went on to tour Newcastle (February / March) and Bristol (April / May 1980), implied to non-metropolitan audiences that British Art had been behaving itself all along. Similar 'views' of British art were quickly put on show in France and the USA, exhibitions depicting "the English as a group of eccentric romantics dropping wood and slate and walking through 'timeless' landscapes, such as *Un Certain Art Anglais* and *The British Art Show*."³²

The 1980 Hayward Annual finally sounded the death knoll for the Arts Council's 70s experimentation, establishing instead something remarkably similar to Fuller's elitist brand of mysticcriticism:

Painting is not easy to write about and I cannot describe or explain these works. I would suggest that their very nature and seriousness denies instant communication. They will not reveal all their secrets immediately. If approached with caution and curiosity, gradually their true identity will be recognised. Some will remain elusive, a dusty mirror withholding secrets, that is their essence. [...] Painting doesn't need any gadgetry and disallows gimmickry. It survives unaided as a pure force.³³ [...] ...real art cannot be grasped, learned or understood quickly. Real art evades easy description, discourages amusing anecdotes, confronts glamour and camp with a stony unblinking eye, and is not welcome in colour supplement land.³⁴

The organisers of the 1980 Hayward positioned their ideological response to British Art in a way which would accord with the audience's ideological assumptions, thereby securing their consent to their own subjection and to the hegemony of 'serious culture'. The most successful and influential curatorial press-gang of the early Thatcher era came the following year, *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy of Art in London.

³¹BERNARD DENVIR, "A Slice of Seventies Art: Interview with William Packer" [British Art Show 1], *Art Monthly*, No.34, 1980, p4.

³²CONRAD ATKINSON, "Books: The Countryside of the Poor", [John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*], *Art Monthly*, No.37, 1980, p23. See also DUNCAN MACMILLAN, "Exhibitions: 'British Art Now' in New York", [The 'Guggenheim debacle'] *Art Monthly*, No.34, 1980, p13-14.

³³JOHN HOYLAND, "An Introduction to the Exhibition", Hayward Annual 1980, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980, p5.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p6.

As this first gathering together of New Painting was to be held at London's Royal Academy, it was obviously incumbent on the organisers to include a reasonable quota of British artists. This they did not by finding equivalent new British painters, but by turning to a whole group of established figurative painters, Frank Auerbach, R.B. Kitaj and Lucien Freud among them. For all their virtues, their work obviously belonged to a different ethos than the Italian and German contingent. A more satisfactory parallel to continental developments could have been found in a group of young sculptors, Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg and Anish Kapoor, who worked with transformed materials to produce work of great wit and imagination.³⁵

By grouping Freud, Auerbach, Kossoff and Hodgkin and alongside Kitaj and Bacon, *within an international context*, the *New Spirit* organisers suggested that these painters formed a group by merit of their shared isolation from the international avant-garde. Although there is some truth in this claim, it is apparent, even from a brief examination of their work, that these artists were far from being consciously nationalistic. The organiser's promotion of the *zeitgeist* as an escape from the 'art crisis', however, suggested that the isolated position of the School of London allowed them to harbour specifically 'British' qualities.³⁶ Critical niches were easily carved for any opportunistic critic willing to refute international modernism in favour of an 'authentic British Art'.³⁷ Much of this school of criticism directly mis-appropriated the radical academic challenge to the canon:

The revision that is desirable does not involve demotion of the currently accepted giants but significant expansion of the pantheon, and recognition of the 'mainstream' does not follow the pattern of a railway line but rather the wide-flowing river fed by many tributaries and composed of interweaving currents.³⁸

The implication here is not that the assumptions underlying 'the canon' needed to be destabilised or abandoned, but that a new canon had to be created, a canon based on 'British National Identity'.³⁹ This was not a new development. Earlier in the 1970s, Patrick Heron had

³⁵TONY GODFREY, "British Painting at the Cross-roads", *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1986, p89.

³⁶The authentication of British national identity proved to be a powerful political force in this period. By 1982 Argentine forces occupied the Falkland Islands. Thatcher's ailing, unpopular government sent a task force to the Argentines. Bolstered by the success of her jingoistic Falkland Islands policy, Thatcher led the Conservatives to a sweeping victory in the parliamentary elections of June 1983.

³⁷By 1986, Frances Spalding was able to 'authoritatively' claim that *British* art had hitherto went unnoticed because "a concern with modernism has blinkered critical evaluation of twentieth-century art, encouraging historians, in its emphasis on innovation, to look for a linear evolutionary development, a tendency which has helped to banish into temporary obscurity much that did not uphold the dominant avant-garde ideology." FRANCES SPALDING, "Preface", *British Art Since 1900*, Thames & Hudson, London 1986.

³⁸ MORPHET, "An Under-rated Art", *The Hard-Won Image*, p15.

voiced his dissatisfaction that New York was dominating the artworld. "What was really rich about Heron was that it wasn't the phenomenon of hegemony that worried him, but that it was NY-based and not British. Forward the Light Brigade! He set out an intra-modernist almanac of who really ought to be famous - and it certainly isn't those nasty New York modernists."⁴⁰ A similar 'alternative' set of assumptions about the virtues by which British art was to be understood, were more explicitly outlined by Fuller throughout the 1980s. During this period the influence of Morris and Ruskin led Fuller to form a picture of an "indigenous"⁴¹ British tradition, insular, intransigent, rooted in the human figure and in higher landscape painting. The Other of this tradition was identified first as 'Modernity' and subsequently as 'modernism' and 'internationalism'. In effect, Modernist art history, criticised for its historicism, was supplanted by a less considerable historicist system which presupposed the consistency and continuity of a national tradition.

The 'British Tradition' apparently consists of Constable, Bomberg, Kossoff, Hoyland and Hockney [...] the "peculiarly British empirical tradition which can be traced back to Constable, Hume, Locke, Bacon and beyond" (one painter and four philosophers). What happened to it between 1837 and the 1950s? How did it leap from an early nineteenth century Suffolk farmer's son to the arms of an "immigrant polish Jewish leatherworker's son?"⁴²

Nonetheless, for many, the humanist perspective from which the Royal Academy had examined the history of recent painting was vindicated as precisely the re-evaluative context that this work required. This belief resulted in a devastatingly destructive effect on the 'serious' critical approach to the School of London and the study of recent British art in general. Typical of many of the School's detractors faced with Richard Morphet's *Hard-Won Image* (a term coined by Timothy Hyman) exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1984, John Roberts created a conceptual weld between the humanist *interpretation* and support of the group with the *work* of group:

...drawing, the integrity of the human figure, and the 'intense' relationship between subject and object are intended to act as closure against the critical and projective assumptions of self-modernising art. The argument therefore is never about representation as a self-conscious, public and political act, but about the resilience of certain kinds of genre painting in the face of more novel forms of representation. Discussion of the body, the landscape, the community is stuck within the frozen terms of humanist subject matter.

³⁹ Morphet's hypocrisy should not go unchecked. He had, of course, been a spokesperson for the Tate during the Bricks debacle, which he defended unashamedly by evoking the purity of the late modernist canon.

⁴⁰ TERRY ATKINSON, "Notes: Communities, Artists, Modernism", *Studio International*, March / April 1976.

⁴¹ FULLER, "The Arts Council Collection", *Art Monthly*, Number 39, September 1980, p14.

⁴² ALAN GOUK, "Peter Fuller, Art Critic?", *Artscribe*, No. 30, August 1981, p42-43.

Thus, the School of London were criticised for attempting to provide a putative escape from modernity. The lure of such critical rhetoric, unconsciously gathers audiences into his value-system, beliefs and ideology. Roberts' textual authority over the criticism he maligns is convincing, hiding the fact that he adopts inverse induction, placing his conclusion before his premises. His interpretation ("drawing, the integrity of the human figure, and the intense relationship between subject and object are intended to act as closure against the critical and projective assumptions of self-modernising art") is in fact a product of the brief account of the arguments of its supporters which he goes on to make. There are, then, a number of problems with Roberts' criticisms. Roberts almost entirely neglects the works that are subject to debate, in favour of clarifying his position in relation to Modernism (not unlike his opportunistic opponents). In effect, his criticism repeats the mistakes of those whom they are directed against, ignoring the work in order to engage in an professedly recondite historiographic dispute. The old ways of seeing are not allowed to die and be replaced, they retain centre stage in order to be debunked for all time in a revolution without aim.

Roberts allowed his developed method to degenerate into a set of narrow evaluative criteria. While he was, of course, correct to insist that The School of London be judged within history, the problem remained in that he judged them against the group definitions given by their conservative supporters, thereby failing to check his experience of their work and writings against such accounts. Such was the nature of Andrew Brighton's critique of such uncompromisingly materialist stances:

...some contemporary art stems from and invites a professional discourse that does not value the embodied or the expressive and what cannot be said. Rather it claims to be cleansed by theory of the mouldy rhetoric of the heroic artist and to produce 'pieces' with clean handed precision.⁴³

As Brighton suggested, materialist critics such as Roberts, failed to respond to Auerbach's work because it celebrates "the idea of inarticulate experience, of things beyond textual discourse."⁴⁴ Brighton's idea is perhaps slightly misleading yet not deliberately so, as Roberts might have it. Accepting the notion that Auerbach paints something beyond textual discourse does not entail a denial of history, indeed this position can only be understood if the works of the School of London are read in relation to their social production. Contrary to the claims of Roberts and their many detractors, the School of London on the whole, did not so much deny the disparate claims of postmodern theory as resist them.

⁴³ANDREW BRIGHTON, "Frank Auerbach", *Art Monthly*, No. 141, November 1990, p13

⁴⁴ibid.

In order to come to some understanding of this concept we must give firstly consider what it was to be a painter at the turn of the 1980s. Painting is a slow manual process. Within the context of postmodern society, where communication is rapid, painting *might* seem a strangely subversive activity.⁴⁵ In the early 1980s, the School of London were supported by very similar lines of reasoning.⁴⁶ The connection between these views and the members of the School of London is not unsubstantiated. An example of the argument for the “resilience of certain kinds of drawing and oil painting in the face of more novel forms of representation” (justifiably detracted by Roberts) is Auerbach’s claim that “television is a barbarous invention [...] that sort of easy commerce of television perhaps is not conducive to an activity which has something to do with somebody standing in a room and inventing something, for themselves.”⁴⁷ What is surprising is the manner in which this practical line of reasoning was later used to defend the School at the expense of the ‘avant-garde’:

Dramatic attempts at surprise and revelation turn quickly into mechanical routine. Or as Frank Auerbach has put it ‘I wouldn’t reject anything that seemed shocking or extreme ... on the contrary I would value it, but I wouldn’t do it for its own sake ... to do it for its own sake then becomes part of the world of advertisement and fashion.’¹ For artist’s to whom ‘advance’ is an imperative there is a grave risk, always avoided by the greatest avant-garde figures, that their work will be stranded within the sensibility of a narrow span of time and fashion. Equally such art may seem the result not so much of a passionate pursuit, as of a game.⁴⁸

Auerbach’s distaste for television culture is converted into an assault on contemporary art. It should be noted that this derogatory description of an art “stranded within the sensibility of a narrow span of time and fashion” is clearly intended to correspond to the art of the seventies. Ironically, such a definition would have been embraced by the 1970s artists as fundamental to the continued existence of art. Indeed, the primary significance of such artists came from their recognition that art has *always* been a game played according to undetermined rules, for it is only as such that it might claim any relevance to its time.

Does it follow that *any* interesting claims can be made for ‘traditional’ painting if we acknowledge its contingency within postmodern society?

⁴⁵As Western society assimilated the influences of mass media, philosophic nihilism, cultural plurality and the pervasive commercialisation of culture, the symbols and icons of long-standing cultural traditions lost their ability to affect a response. The painted image lacked the ontological intensity it had before the technologies of mass production and the video broadcast saturated the visual sphere with imagery.

⁴⁶ “As Marcuse pointed out, the aesthetic and subjective aspects of art constitute ‘an antagonistic force in capitalist society.’ FULLER, “The Arts Council Collection”, p16.

⁴⁷FRANK AUERBACH, “A conversation with Catherine Lampert”, in WILLIAM WRIGHT and ANTHONY BOND, *The British Show*, Beaver Press, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1984,

⁴⁸MORPHET, “An Under-rated Art”, p15.

A special quality of the hand-made representational image is its potential of realising the full potential of an encounter in a permanent form which, of its nature, makes the encounter with subject and the encounter with material one thing, which is completely new. [...] Powerfully present though the subject already is to the artist as he begins work, he nevertheless has in a sense to discover it in the independent terms of his material, which has a reality of its own. In order that a work should be truly new, it must be thoroughly *wrought*.⁴⁹

According to this view, painting may resist the over-saturation of postmodern culture by creating anew. As such, the act of painting might constitute a form of critical resistance to the dominant modes of representation in postmodern society. Such a view would appear to correspond to the modernist doctrine decreeing that a work of art transcends the 'chaos' of modern life and the contradictions by being an autonomous object. However, if we consider this claim alongside Art & Language's involvement with painting "as a means of engagement with that phenomenon which the promotional sections of the art world were preparing to celebrate as a New Spirit in Painting"⁵⁰ its conservative character becomes less tangible. While A&L avoided talk of "thoroughly *wrought*" images, they clearly valued painting's potential impenetrability as a means of curtailing theoretically obtuse forms of postmodern art production. As has been demonstrated, it can be deduced that A&L's paintings were as much a reaction to the *New Spirit* as they were to the slick professionalism of much 'University Art'. For Harrison, A&L had a decidedly *critical* project in mind here: "In a world of dichotomies, the opposing face of the status quo is a mirror image. What is required for the resolution of the dilemma is that the opposing terms be brought into collision so that the whole circumstance is changed."⁵¹

In order to decide if Art & Language *merely* mirrored their critical targets, we need to test this proposition, exploring their line of critical resistance to postmodernism by examining seemingly opposing terms at a more abstract level. As has also been demonstrated, central to critical postmodernist theory of the late 70 and early 80s was the belief that individual subjects are denied the possibility of knowing 'material reality' since they are constructed by various texts and discourses, through which subject positions are created for them. Hence, material

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p26. "As if we were subliminally aware of the frailty of his own rhetoric, Peter Fuller buttresses it with the suggestion that in any case these non-standard media of 'conceptual' art are insufficiently *wrought* to qualify. This is different, and perhaps better, argument. Before we accept it we shall need to know both its general form (and how it will deal with minimal art and *object trouves*) and its application, case by case, to supposedly 'conceptual' offerings that are by no means all alike in this, or any other, respect." DONALD BROOK, "Art and Socialism (Again)", *Art Monthly*, Number 45, April 1981, p29.

⁵⁰ CHARLES HARRISON, "'Seeing' and 'Describing: the Artists' Studio'", *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p157.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p135.

reality was regarded not only as unknowable but unchangeable by conscious intervention.⁵² To varying degrees, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff sought to resist such aspects of critical postmodernist theory. In a manner similar to Kitaj and Hockney's New Humanistic Paintings, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff were attempting to re-assert that representations are created by people not vice versa.⁵³

As a student at the Borough Polytechnic, Auerbach was taught to continually search for a 'true equivalence' between the 'tangible thing' observed and the marks which appeared on the painted surfaces of his canvasses. Following the example of his mentor, David Bomberg, he sought not merely to capture 'reality' in paint but to recreate 'quotidian facts' on the canvas. It is nonetheless clear that Auerbach, like Bomberg, was aware that painting does not passively 'reflect reality' but actually contributes to the definition and production of our sense of the real. This is implicit in Auerbach's famous description of intent:

What I'm not hoping to do is to paint another picture because there are enough pictures in the world. I'm hoping to make a new thing for the world that remains in the mind like a new species of living thing.⁵⁴

This does not entail a stubbornly empiricist practice but a recognition that painting creates a life-world, that production rather than perception is fundamental. To produce "a new species of living thing" is not only to actively shape the conditions of other's perceptual devices, but to acknowledge that our cultural productions literally are *the world*.

To what extent did this differ from A&L's experiments with representation? The experience of *Portraits of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock* took on considerably more than the attributes of an analytic proposition. The paintings proclaimed their relevance to the viewer from a context that included all art, status quo and mirror image. There was an implied conceptual circumstance surrounding the perceptual experience of such an art encounter. It was almost a meta experience designed to reflect on itself and its nature as art; the encounter challenging the viewer to realise its value in relation to the history of art. A&L thus believed that painting could be reworked because it fulfilled the conditions of the belief system of the myth in a way that alters what is known about art and/or about ourselves. Indeed, its relevance

⁵² See Chapter 5 Photoconceptualism

⁵³ The School of London's other 'members' are more difficult to assess within Kitaj's terms. While Francis Bacon was cited as a member of the group, his work had achieved international acclaim before the re-assessment of the school began in the early 1980s. Although Bacon made many of his great works during the 70s and 80s, a critical appraisal is outwith the scope of this thesis. Howard Hodgkin's work was not seriously related to the 'school' until the mid-80s. Since Hodgkin's work does not comply easily with Kitaj's figurative schema, nor with the concerns of 'figuratively' minded critics of the early 80s, I briefly refer to his position in Chapter 15, with regards to the debate over the first Turner Prize of 1984.

⁵⁴ AUERBACH, "A conversation with Catherine Lampert", in WILLIAM WRIGHT and ANTHONY BOND, *The British Show*, Beaver Press, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1984,

was particularly insured in 1980 given renewed conservative attempts to incorporate the viewer into painting's developing cultural mythology. Art & Language's re-cognition of painting for its parodic nature acculturated the viewer: "Action in the face of such a dilemma involved "commitment to a more-or-less unpredictable outcome."⁵⁵ The realisation of painting had value as a revelation with metaphysical content. A&L used parody as a deconstructive strategy that recasts the metaphysical truth of previous art into a new context that insures a synthesis of viewer, history and a burgeoning world view. In this extreme self-reflexiveness lies the crux of A&L's differences with Auerbach: "The actor on the stage expresses sadness. Is he therefore sad? Need he ever have experienced authentic sadness? No. All that is required to make him a competent actor is that he should be able competently to *represent* sadness - that he should know how to fake it."⁵⁶

Despite what A&L thought, New Image painting was never intended to reassert notions of competence and spontaneity associated with expressionist painting. If anything *they* knew how to fake it. Were the kinds of deep significance read into Auerbach's paintings also literally superficial components of the painting's material surface? Although the twisted, smeared and flayed flesh of Auerbach's paintings appears to suggest that he approaches his work with the daubed fervour of the Expressionists, he in fact carefully *builds* his paintings. Does this mean that, like A&L's mouth paintings, Auerbach's canvases are revelations of their own genesis? In *Depiction and the Golden Calf*, Auerbach's friend and critical apologist Michael Podro, describes his working process as follows:

[Auerbach] has worked continuously on his subject to produce not a view, but a summation of many perceptions. By the sixties the procedure had established itself of working over the canvas a hundred times or more, as well as doing innumerable drawings, scraping the canvas down more or less fully each time, and starting again, until in one final stage he could hold the whole thing in his mind in one continuous, sustained argument.⁵⁷

Podro, characteristically, suggests that Auerbach, seeks a formal-conceptual closure, "a final comprehensive formulation",⁵⁸ rather than A&L's unpredictable outcome. The evidence for this is drawn from Podro's personal formal observations of Auerbach's works and statements:

⁵⁵ HARRISON, "Seeing' and 'Describing: the Artists' Studio", p135.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ MICHAEL PODRO, "Depiction and the Golden Calf", in BRYSON, NORMAN., HOLLY, MICHAEL ANN., MOXEY, KEITH. *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, p177.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p176-177.

The problem of painting is to see a unity within a multiplicity of pieces of evidence. [...] When the conclusion occurs and I feel I've been lucky enough to find some sort of whole for this overwhelming and unmanageable heap of sensations and impressions, I think the previous attempts have contributed.⁵⁹

Similarly, for Podro, painting takes place within

a horizon of possibilities which an object of experience would yield, and the indeterminate sense of those possibilities is governed, for each of us, by our own general sense of how the world is; for instance, our sense of how objects are set and perceived within the spatio-temporal, causally ordered world, or our sense of the modifications a person's face or body may be expected to undergo as circumstances alter.⁶⁰

Figure 12.1 Frank Auerbach, *Head of Michael Podro*, (1981)

While accepting this, however, Podro attempts to deny that Auerbach's technique proclaims the fact that our modes of representation and cognition are continually shifting. The reason for this lies in Podro's methodological assumptions. Although he is "committed to enlarging on the phenomenological character of painting in a way which may help to chart its diversities in this century [he wishes to do this] in a way which will preserve the sense of continuity of earlier and later procedures."⁶¹ In this, Podro reveals himself to be a "perceptualist". Predicating his thoughts on logical positivism, he suggests that



representations and the represented are logically separable, that painting is a visual adjunct to the primary event. This belief enables Podro to claim that since the basic 'reality' does not change, some representational systems can be 'truer' than others. The truth-value of these representations can be measured against the basic reality and the art of the past that has a similar goal. This phenomenological stance explains why Podro insists not only that formal unity is eventually achieved in Auerbach's pictures, but that this unity is an index of their success as works of art.

⁵⁹AUERBACH, "A conversation with Catherine Lampert", in WILLIAM WRIGHT and ANTHONY BOND, *The British Show*, Beaver Press, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1984.

⁶⁰ PODRO, "Depiction and the Golden Calf", p181.

⁶¹ibid., p177.

During this period, A&L noted that many such studies of the problems of perception were being pursued as the disciplinary opposite of the social history of art:

Work on the psychology of artistic representation tends to assume a single and universally applicable model: the figure referred to in Richard Wollheim's formula as the 'adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator.' Yet if we restrict our interest in paintings to their iconic (picturing) aspects, and our understanding of representation to the matter of how pictures are graphically connected to the world, we will have to acknowledge (*pace* Flint Schier) that pictorial systems are individuated in terms of competencies, and that competencies are relative.⁶² [For example:] ...the wiring-diagram which is a kind of systematic picture for one person is a meaningless pattern for another. Furthermore, (Schier again), the iconicity of symbol is aspect relative; it may be iconic *qua* one content and one non-iconic *qua* another.⁶³

Although being practically and conceptually less reflexive and experimental, Auerbach's pictures nonetheless suggested a remarkably similar attitude. Auerbach's paintings are predicated on the consequences of Wittgenstein's view that language shapes reality, that we have no access to reality save through our representations of it. This is the crux of his **secular romanticism**, his meditative stance on painting and the nature of representation. Although in some of his statements Auerbach speaks of his efforts to subsume flux into the harmonious and elegant structure of his pictures, he, in fact, believes this to be an impossible task:

When I see the great pictures of the world paraded in my mind's eye they are great images which don't leak into other images, they are new things. [...] One hopes somehow to make something that has a similar degree of individuality, independence, fullness and perpetual motion to these pictures. But actually one hopes, although of course one won't achieve it, one actually hopes in vain.⁶⁴

This is not merely a practical issue. It is not that Auerbach lacks the technical skill to produce great 'individual' pictures, but that such pictures are themselves only *seemingly* great, in their perfect state they exist only as products of consciousness 'paraded in his mind's eye'. The implication is that great pictures are great because we need them to be, that they gain a sense of order and grandeur only if we decide to bestow it upon them. Thus, in arguing the case for continuity of approach between the pictures from the past and the present, Podro in fact constructs the analytical criteria with which to evaluate the achievements of the past and the present. Realising the circularity of this process produces an immense sense of unease as to the precise nature of artistic value, the value of art seemly depending only upon what we are taught to look for. Auerbach's statements reveal that he is similarly unsure about his own

⁶² HARRISON, "'Seeing' and 'Describing: the Artists' Studio", p130.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ AUERBACH, "A conversation with Catherine Lampert".

achievements, he is only able to speak of attaining “some sort of whole”, or of “*think[ing]* the previous attempts have contributed”,⁶⁵ suggesting that Podro vastly overestimates Auerbach’s faith in his own cultural agency. Auerbach, like A&L, is aware that the change involved is not then within the control of the individual agent, that art history is not simply a series of triumphs of the will. This helps to explain why Auerbach makes his most radical decisions at the end of each painting: “I tend to scrape it off and do it again from top to bottom after months or years of working, in a relatively short time”. This is even to the extent that “when one finally does finish the painting .. one tends to contradict what’s gone before”.⁶⁶

Although I would strongly argue against a *deliberate* failure to signify on Auerbach’s part, it would nonetheless seem that it is Podro rather than Auerbach who finds resolution. Persisting in his incompetence by failing to determine the world by formal-conceptual resolutions, Auerbach attempts to produce a vacillating relationship between sensory perceptions and the conceptualising of these sensations. It nonetheless remains apparent that for Podro, who seeks Kant’s complex and harmonious ‘free play’ of the imagination and the understanding, Auerbach’s work may easily evoke unadulterated aesthetic pleasure. The free play which Auerbach creates, however, is peculiarly tainted, in that it forces us to recognise the self-contradiction at the heart of post-modernist theory, that “any attempt to talk of ends, limits, or the impossibility of limits, presupposes precisely the logocentric-metaphysical system which it calls into question.”⁶⁷ Accordingly, Auerbach’s pictures may provide a complex set of problems and pleasures only through apprehending their character and content as anchored in and arising from the specific structures which constitute them on a primary level. Auerbach involves us in an experience that is individualising or text-centred, while allowing pleasure to be taken in the conceptual aspects of his pictures without them thereby becoming anti-aesthetic. Examination reveals that, far from being ‘formal resolutions’, Auerbach’s drawings and paintings establish an ironic clash between the implied pursuit of a centre and the latent violence in the treatment of his chosen motif.

It is this aspect of Auerbach’s work which implies a critique of both analytical philosophy and its postmodernist offspring. Although his pictures invite us to adopt an

⁶⁵ibid., (My emphasis).

⁶⁶ MORPHET, “A Hard- Won Art”, p19. By 1983, Art & Language were becoming aware of the practical predicament of finishing paintings: “The paintings [...] were like forms of mask behind which an elusive form of work could be continued. [Mel Ramsden:] “When we did ‘Portraits of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock’ we did about nine paintings and we discovered that some were better than others. There had to be a reason for that. It rather sneaked up on us that this was connected with making the things rather than thinking them up....” HARRISON, “‘Seeing’ and ‘Describing: the Artists’ Studio””, p146.

⁶⁷PAUL CROWTHER, “The Producer as Artist”, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p94.

analytical approach, they simultaneously warn us that to do so would involve the destruction of the illusionary life-world that provides them with their status as pictorial analytical propositions. As the figures and spaces suggested in Auerbach's drawings and paintings appear to disintegrate into the very forms which construct them, the viewer is called upon to lend emphatic support to a dormant illusion, to *see in*. Auerbach's paintings and drawings thereby reveal that our condition of dwelling and being still takes place in a domain that is not clearly bounded. For Auerbach, it is not 'Nature' or the 'Real' that may offer some form of emancipation but Culture, our faith in the possibilities of the culturally constructed 'imagination'. Paul Crowther argues that

we are [...] embodied beings; and this means that no matter how much our behaviour is determined by cultural and ideological norms, there is always an irreducible residue of individuality in our out-look on the world. Those who merely produce are orientated towards behaviour that is rational but socially over-determined. Those who create art, in contrast, edge towards the residue of individuality and a relatively free expression of their rational being.⁶⁸

Auerbach's work, therefore, both is and is not a form of secular romanticism, poised between the limits of our thought and an underlying agony that we should remain bound by the post-modernist distrust of the "speculative imagination".⁶⁹



This leaves Auerbach open to a major criticism. If he questions the existence of the centre, why does he continue to search for it? Since his entire life's work amounts to nothing more than a futile pursuit, is his modesty ("of course one won't achieve it") entirely false? [Figure 12.2 Frank Auerbach *Portrait of Sandra*, (work in progress), (1973-74)] The answer to this again rests in his uneasy relationship with analytical philosophy. For Auerbach the

⁶⁸ibid., p85.

analytical void is both a challenge (something which needs to be filled) and a threat (the absence of signification=death). This leads us back to the revelation of his pictures, namely that to be alive necessitates continuing to make failed attempts to 'present the unrepresentable'. The 'death wish' is more properly understood as a longing for Nirvana, for 'entropy' an unattainable non-state of stasis where identity is meaningless. The quest for the experience of the pre-linguistic is ultimately contradictory, since it seeks to say the unsayable, to represent desire, to translate the irrational into the rational and conscious form of representational construction. It is therefore apparent that for Auerbach to voluntarily stop making pictures would represent the kind of closure that cannot come. As Harrison himself has acknowledged, this, if anything, would be false modesty:

If the experiment had a 'conclusion', it was not that there was some new position to be claimed for art. It was rather that practice was a matter of being cast adrift upon the polity, and of nevertheless seeking to navigate and to act.⁷⁰

To return to Andrew Brighton's thesis that Auerbach deals with "the idea of inarticulate experience, of things beyond textual discourse"⁷¹, nonetheless, is invalid. Auerbach's pictures in fact reveal that there is nothing beyond 'textual discourse', while demonstrating our futile drive to make sense of our experiences.

Figure 12.3 Leon Kossoff
Booking Hall, Kilburn Underground
Station No.2, (1977)



Leon Kossoff's paintings are often compared with Auerbach's since both artists shared similar practical and philosophical roots under the tuition of Bomberg. However, in comparison to Auerbach's work, it is apparent that Kossoff's pictures represent less of a departure from the example of Bomberg. Kossoff's unreconstructed positivism is located in the complex surface of his painterly webs. For Kossoff, the painted surface can reveal truths, not only about an allegedly 'alien reality' but about the people and places it connotes. Unlike Auerbach's slow (unsuccessful) process,

⁶⁹ AUERBACH, "A conversation with Catherine Lampert".

⁷⁰ HARRISON, "'Seeing' and 'Describing: the Artists' Studio", p95.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

Kossoff's method of practice reveals his expressionist intent: "...the surface is usually laid down quickly: often in a matter of hours. Kossoff lays the board on the floor, and the disposition of the painting across the surface owes much to rapidly performed body movements."⁷² Fuller goes on to note that the painted marks are "informed by the precise, obsessive discipline of all those drawings from object which preceded the act of painting"⁷³, in a vain attempt to prove that Kossoff arrives at a more 'truthful' account, a 'hard-won image', by way of thorough empirical investigation. Although what Fuller suggests is contradictory, it does signal that Kossoff intends his mark making to be *evocative*. Kossoff's subject matter and nomenclature clearly supports this argument. In allusion to Constable's English pastoralism, Kossoff paints recognisable places and events (*Inside Kilburn Underground: Summer 1983*, *Children's Swimming Pool: Autumn Afternoon*) appending the season in which they were painted to his literalist titles. As such, Kossoff seeks to wed Impressionist notions of truth to site with expressionist notions of subjective and atmospheric construction. Kossoff, unlike Auerbach, is straightforwardly a 'secular romantic'.

Lucien Freud's early practice involved a more complex approach to the question of 'the real':

My object in painting pictures is to try and move the senses by giving an intensification of reality. [...] Painters who use life itself as their subject matter, working with the object in front of them, or constantly in mind, do so in order to translate life into art almost literally, as it were. The subject must be kept under closest observation: if this is done, day and night, the subject - he, she or it - will eventually reveal all without which selection itself is not possible [...] It is this very knowledge of life which can give art complete independence from life, an independence that is necessary because the picture in order to move us must never merely remind us of life, but must acquire a life of its own, precisely in order to reflect life...⁷⁴

Writing here in 1954, Freud's wish is remarkably similar to Auerbach's desire to produce "a new species of living thing." Freud also shared Auerbach's belief that our drive to make sense of our experiences is ultimately futile:

A moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation but disappears towards the completion of the work. [...] Were it not for this, the perfect painting could be created and the painter could retire. It is this great insufficiency that drives him on.⁷⁵

⁷²FULLER, "Leon Kossoff", in WRIGHT and BOND, *The British Show*, 1984.

⁷³ibid.

⁷⁴LUCIEN FREUD, "Some Thoughts on Painting", *Encounter*, Vol. 3 No. 1, July 1954.

⁷⁵ibid.

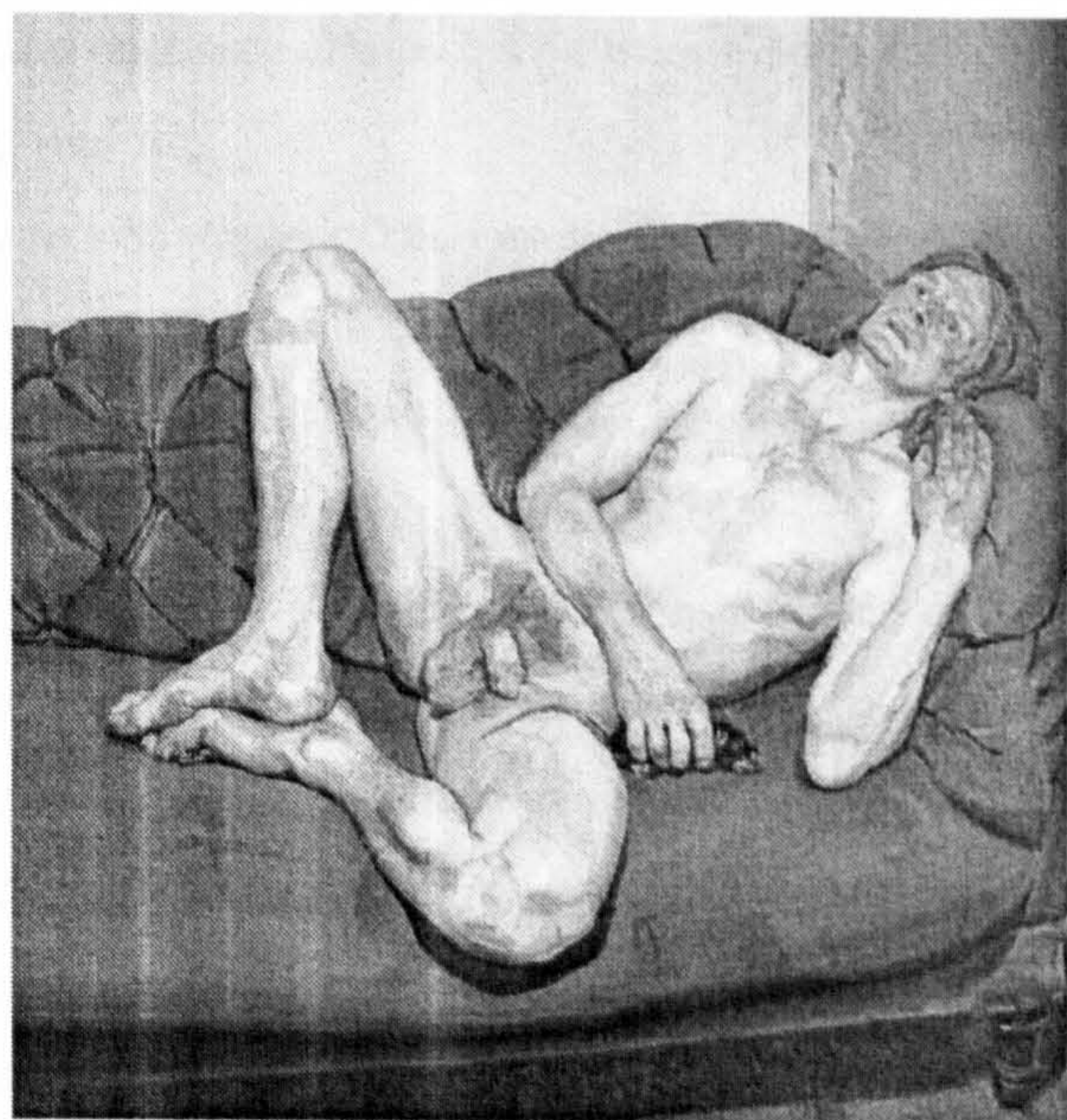
Freud soon moved away from the devotional anticipation associated with his early work and the paintings of Auerbach in order to adopt the position of an arch-empiricist, advocating a 'Realist' painting process which would produce works which that manifest powerfully concrete sensations:

I would wish my paintings to be *of* the people, not *like* them. Not having a look of the sitter, *being* them. [...] As far as I am concerned the paint *is* the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does.

Although often read as a straightforward avocation of 'Realism', the precise position offered in Freud's (in)famous statement is unusually perplexing. Certainly, Freud seeks a more 'direct' route than previously, transforming his painting from "an intensification of reality" to the Aristotelian ideal of "*being*" reality. At the same time, however, Freud clearly maintains some interest in the "independence" of painting, strictly underlining the autonomous nature of his paintings with his contention that "the paint *is* the person." What is noticeable, is the absence of his acknowledgement of art's "great insufficiency". Freud's work in the 1970s and 80s no longer posed the problem of 'false modesty', since the existence of the centre is no longer problematic. However, in claiming that 'reality' *can* both be found and captured, Freud begins to invite more the more serious accusation of creating repetitious conceits. Freud's fraudulence is inseparable from the existentialist ideology underpinning his art. Rather than encourage us to interpret his paintings, he wishes us to languish in a barren terrain of purposeless 'fact'. In proposing his paintings to be akin to the objects which they represent, Freud merely encourages us to return to surface qualities, to regard his paintings simply as another series of *objet d'art*.

Figure 12.4 Lucien Freud, *Naked Man with Rat*, (1977-78).

What Freud desires, then, is a kind of representational Minimalism, an 'art of the real'. As such, his paintings are intended to be both iconographically and emphatically disengaged. Iconographically, it is highly significant that Freud's human figures do not look at the viewer, many look away passively, others close their eyes as though sleeping or dead. His working process is intended to reinforce this inertness while discouraging interpretation. Adopting the realist



convention/cliché of non-hierarchical representation, paying equal care and attention to *everything* depicted on the surface of his canvases. Formally, Freud's paintings evoke minimalist values of honesty and clarity by way of an illusory simplicity and coolness of tone, a plain style in which images appear to limit themselves to precise and denotative meanings while

dismaying in their denial of life-force. The result is paintings in which humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects are rendered one; as Freud put it, “the head is just another limb”. Despite the claims of painting connoisseurs, Freud’s frigid painting process does not invite approbation, rather it elucidates the (lack of) meaning in his literalist statements, suggesting that to be reduced to nothing is an end, that it represents a kind of formal stability. In this sense, Freud’s paintings represent a radical break with the Realist tradition. Rather than the humanist empathy associated with Realism, we are confronted with a complete absence of creative or mythic forces. The sterility implied in the moral relativism of inanimate objects, plants, embodied beings, and the human capacity for myth making is intended to compel by being repellant, the process of anti-interpretation encouraged by Freud’s work leading us back to the reductionism of formalist erotics, the Auerbachian “new species of living thing.”

This raises an important critical point, in that by creating a pictorial circularity with a satisfying sense of finality, Freud negates his early concern with art’s “great insufficiency”. If this were correct, then Freud’s continued productivity would indeed amount to no more than series of repetitious conceits. Unwittingly for Freud, a major problem arises for this line of criticism, in that the literalist underpinnings of his practice (“I would wish my paintings to be *of* the people, not *like* them”, “I would wish my work to appear *factual*, not literal”) once again nurtures the notion that there is a reality separate from our various modes of representation and cognition. In addition to the problems that we have already encountered, this raises an old chestnut. In Freud’s paintings, the presence of figurative elements deriving from his representational process encourage us to read iconographic and iconological significance into them, a manner of reading which is decidedly anti-literal despite the literalist outcome of such readings. Although this could be said to be a failure on our part, Freud has often been guilty of leading the viewer to allocate ‘themes’ of alienation and sexuality to his paintings using such symbolically charged elements as fried eggs, dogs and rats.

Hence, despite his attempts eradicate humanist concepts such as iconography, artistry and Realism by exposing them to an amoral vacuum, Freud, in fact, is ultimately reliant on conventional, captivating humanist effects to produce his mulish, self-satisfied images. As such, the radical aspects of his work are somewhat compromised, the ‘transparency’ of his method being such as to allow us to easily mistake it for the passé Realism that he intends to impair.

Following such an examination, it would seem that, of the entire School of London, only Kossoff’s work is entirely compatible with the various humanist defences of the group. Unlike Roberts and A&L’s sweeping historico-ideological accounts, close textual analysis has the effect of opening the possibilities of historical interpretation, allowing us to proceed to consider not only how The School of London came to be subjected to the critical debates in which they have historically languished, but how, and if, they should be saved from them. The answer to these questions can be found by further analysing the group’s genesis. As we have seen, critical problems began with the Humanist baptism of the School of London in the late 1970s:

The single human figure is a swell thing to draw. It seems to be almost impossible to do it as well as maybe half a dozen blokes have in the past. I'm talking about skill and imagination that can be seen to be done. It is, to my way of thinking and in my own experience, the most difficult thing to do really well in the whole art.⁷⁶

Kitaj here laid the foundations for the viral work aesthetic that continues to effect the School as a whole. Kitaj's vacuous suggestion that figurative painting is good because it is somehow "difficult", has to be read in context. As we have seen, this stance was made at a time when the visual arts were under immense pressure to justify their existence. His stance was, therefore, uncharacteristically propagandistic. That Kitaj's rather facile statements were met with considerable opposition from anti-humanist quarters should come as no surprise. The effect created, however, was a humanist backlash that unfortunately resulted in the humanist account of the School not only becoming absurdly overdetermined, but the prominent account of the School *per se*.

By 1978, following the populist impression created by the crisis critics, 'common-sense defences' of perceptualism had become increasingly audible in the art press:

At last, artists are coming out from under the modernist dogma of purist-reductionism which has, in its final stages, so impoverished the great tradition of creative imagery in Western art. Neo-Platonist mysticism, flowering in a period of cultural decline and disillusion, lent a systematic ideology to justify the retreat from depiction. [...] Now, perhaps, we are ready for a neo-Aristotelianism.⁷⁷

However, the most elaborate misrepresentation to occur in this period was Fuller's resolutely humanist version of events. Drawing heavily on Herbert Marcuse's critique of materialist aesthetics, Fuller began to suggest that Kossoff and Auerbach created a kind of "redemption through form", a hedonistic aesthetic reparation. Read weakly, Fuller's theory appears to be remarkably close to what the Auerbach and Kossoff were attempting to achieve. For Fuller, however, Auerbach and Kossoff's paintings were 'formally redemptive' since they produced the kind of optical quality of frisson which Roger Fry described as being like an "internal ejaculation". The manner in which this thesis was argued was remarkably similar to certain formalist claims that abstraction entailed a critique of culture by creating an alternative universe:

[Many of Kossoff's pictures] are permeated by an undeniable sense of sadness, and awareness of the anguish, frailty and impermanence of life. And yet the energy,

⁷⁶R.B. KITAJ, "Pearl diving", *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.

⁷⁷JANET DALEY, "New Figuration: Part III", *Art Review*, Volume XXX, No.11, 9th June 1978, p289.

intensity, and sensuousness of the way they are painted provides a celebratory transcendence of their subject matter.⁷⁸

While there is some credence in his claims, Fuller entirely underestimated the importance of the motifs in Kossoff's and Auerbach's pictures. According to Fuller, the motifs were simply a means to a formally 'redemptive' end. An examination of Kossoff's paintings, however, reveals that motifs were in fact the sole reason for establishing the morphological character and 'mood' of his mark making. Although Auerbach was relatively iconographically disinterested, his pictures did not entirely invite the notion that formal and conceptual ends can ultimately be achieved.

In the early 80s, Fuller continued to make further misreadings as his invective Humanism urged him to make ever-grander claims. Drawing on the writings of Ruskin and Morris, Fuller argued that Auerbach and Kossoff had resurrected a secular sense of moral value in the visual character of the world. Although Fuller continued to claim that both painters produced an art of enduring quality, offering another reality within the existing one, his Ruskinian impetus led him to believe that their pictorial worlds of transcendent affirmation had been transformed from the quotidian.

Also in the early eighties, Fuller was calling for a return to the "shared symbolic order" of 'Nature'. As we have seen in relation to Podro's perceptualist defence of Auerbach, there are severe philosophical problems with the claim that 'Nature' and representation are separable. At the same time, however, Fuller complicated matters by claiming that this achievement fell entirely within the *tradition* of British painting, that Kossoff and Auerbach's work stretched back in an unbroken line to great days of Ruskin.

The question of tradition suggests a fundamental contradiction in Fuller's brand of Ruskinian moralism. To fully return to the "shared symbolic order" of 'Nature', is clearly impossible unless the artist believes that tradition can be ignored. The School of London, however, manifested an even greater involvement with the conventions of past art that were found in historicist Po-Mo. There is no evidence that the School of London believed unmediated expression was possible, indeed as a group they are known for openly celebrating their influences. Although it can easily be demonstrated that these artists ascribed to the post-modern intertextual sensibility, the main difference is the complete absence of irony, or 'double coding' found in most postmodernist work. Unlike appropriationists, for example, the School did not openly betray their sources, rather they attempted to synthesise their influences into a body of different artworks. The greatest difficulties arise from the fact that, on the one hand, this practice was regarded by intertextual postmodernists as signalling the School's lack of postmodern inauthenticity, while on the other, it was lauded by conservatives as proving their authenticity and sincerity as 'serious' painters. The spectacle of postmodernist critics unknowingly reprimanding artists for being inauthentically inauthentic, while conservatives

⁷⁸ FULLER, "Leon Kossoff" in WRIGHT and BOND, *The British Show*, 1984.

such as Hilton Kramer heralded neo-expressionist plagiarists as god-like originators suggests an atmosphere of great critical confusion.

With hindsight, however, it was perhaps not so much that the School of London were somehow *too* influenced for postmodernist tastes, but that they were influenced by the wrong artists, “The Great Tradition of Rembrandt’s humanist painting”⁷⁹ rather than the tradition of the new initiated by Duchamp. A distaste arising from the tenets of modernist historicism prejudiced reading The School of London’s in relation to this pre-modernist Great Tradition. From a Bergerian materialist viewpoint, it was simply assumed that to be influenced by High European painting was to be complicit with its bourgeois ideological underpinnings. That Fuller openly celebrated these underpinnings, made this connection all the more clear. What, however, are the ideological underpinnings of European painting *specifically* in question? During the 1970s, pre-modernist European painting was often characterised by Bergerian materialists by equating commodity fetishism with the rise of the centred subject found in humanist philosophy, much to Fuller’s annoyance.⁸⁰ While such characterisations led to the production of innovative and much needed historical work, they clearly did not correspond with the School of London’s reading of pre-modernist painting.

Freud, for example, often cites the work of Watteau. Rather than read Watteau’s paintings as celebration of the centred subject, Freud concentrated on their anti-humanist aspects, the sense that his paintings may be ultimately meaningless. In this he had much in common with Michael Fried’s reading of eighteenth century French painting in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of California Press, Berkeley, (1980). In the paintings of Chardin, for example, characterised by the use of the contemplative mode, Fried claimed that the figures were directly immersed in their own world and activities, so that they in no way form a state of consciousness with the composition or the necessary presence of the spectator: they are physically impenetrable. The opposite was said to be true of Watteau’s theatrical mode: figures appear to play in their world rather than inhabit it, and the presence of the spectator is no longer denied. In *Large Interior W.11 (After Watteau)*, (1981-83), Freud reads Watteau’s Commedia dell’Arte painting *Pierrot Content* as establishing a space for contemplation while assuring that the spectator cannot penetrate without a feeling of intrusion. “In Freud’s picture his son has become Pierrot, Pierrot the comedian, the public performing persona, but Freud paints his son as if caved in upon himself, introspective, avoiding the stare of the artist and viewer.”⁸¹ While Freud’s structuralist reading

⁷⁹ FULLER, “Auerbach Versus Clemente”, *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1985, p61.

⁸⁰ See FULLER *Seeing Berger: A Revaluation*, Writers & Readers Publishing Co-operative Ltd, London, 1980., and FULLER *Seeing Through Berger*, The Clarridge Press, London, 1988.

⁸¹ BRIGHTON, “Large Interior W.11”, *Art Monthly*, Dec/Jan 1983/4, No.72, p9-10.

of Watteau may be questionable as an *art history*, in relation to Freud's practice we must consider Watteau's pictures as being of no more importance than Freud's sitters and settings. This demonstrates that the hierarchies of art historians and artists are not identical.

Figure 12.5, *Large Interior W.11*
(*After Watteau*), 1981-83.



Freud resolutely remained a cultural trickster, mocking aspects of humanist culture as he reconstituted its anthropomorphic myths. From an existentialist painter's self-analytic perspective, new painting parodies the old before the first paint stroke is laid. To this extent the most novel approach *had* to be seen as a reconfiguration of previous approaches. Paradoxically, the self-referential nature of art served to stabilise the fragmenting structures of our cultural heritage even as it negated the credibility of its defining attributes. This paradox was also recognised by Auerbach, who was also nurtured on 'canonical' works by 'great masters'. He had virtually no interest in the *historically specific* enterprises of such artists, his main concern being to appropriate their 'aura' for his own painting. His quotations served as loaded gestures, informing the viewer that his painting should be seen as sharing the privileged status once accorded to painting by the canonical traditions of art history and the museum. It was for this reason that Auerbach drew so much inspiration from visiting the National Gallery, a museum context in which the art of the past appears still and mute. Typically historicist, Auerbach made no attempt to reclaim or understand the past since keeping 'art imprisoned' ensured his work a formal residue which would exist in extreme tension with the flux suggested by his pseudo-expressionist brushwork.

Although Auerbach's painting was nostalgic, this did not entail his subscription to discredited notions of expressionism, rather it *accentuated* the differences between pre-modernist and modernist modes of cognition, destabilising assumptions about competence and intention, finish and representativeness by which the very idea of a canon tends to be sustained. In this Auerbach was very like Freud, although it remains clear that unlike Freud, Auerbach aimed to overcome cynicism, rather than to merely represent it. Fuller made similar claims for Kossoff's work:

For some years now, Kossoff's work has included renderings of great masterpieces of the past. For example, he has been drawn to Poussin's great picture *Cephalus and Aurora*. [...]. Kossoff seems preoccupied by paintings like this at least in part because he envies the mythic world upon which these artists could still draw to express and convey their innermost sentiments.⁸²

Although Fuller is correct in his analysis, it remains clear that Auerbach's relation to the art past was less committed than Kossoff's. Where Kossoff sought to regain mystification, Auerbach revealed what had been lost. For Kossoff, the art of the past managed to overcome dystopia.⁸³ As for Auerbach, we can never know whether this was the case, all he presented in his works were intimations of 'wholeness' and 'success'.

The differences between the various members of the School of London having been elaborated, it remains clear that Auerbach, Kossoff and Freud were still the most conservative painters to emerge from the *New Spirit* exhibition given that they found it less problematic to suggest their representations were, in some sense more 'authentic' than most. Moreover, given their critical upbringing, it is hardly surprising that an uncompromisingly humanist attitude towards the paintings of the School was to hold centre stage throughout the 1980's, finding its apotheosis as the bread-and-butter of Fuller's popular yet unfashionable art journal *Modern Painters*.

⁸² FULLER, "Leon Kossoff", in WRIGHT and BOND, *The British Show*, 1984.

⁸³ This was compatible with Fuller's belief system: "Fuller's prose rises to poetic heights as he responds to the expressionism of Kossoff's stated aims. Three times he repeats, 'a faintly glimmering memory of a long forgotten, perhaps never experienced childhood', and a fourth time in his own words, falling for the romantic nostalgia of that pathetic fallacy." ALAN GOUK, "Peter Fuller, Art Critic?", *Artscribe*, No.30, August 1981, p43.

CHAPTER 13

Guaranteed Disappointment

The pop fans despised protest as being naive and art as being posh, the protesting students despised pop as being commercial and art as being pretentious, and the artists despised pop for being tasteless and protest for being drab.¹

The answer will surely lie in a synthesis of the modernist and the popular, whereby art retains the right to differ, criticise and affront even as it does its best to keep the welfare of the greatest number in the forefront of its priorities. I believe that an art unlike anything which has ever been evolved before could eventually arise from this merging of the elitist and consensus traditions.²

Perhaps the only thing that art is for today is to illustrate the contradictions and alienation of our society, and its impotence to perform any other function in day-to-day life is its saving grace.³

In 1977, I argued that, for historical reasons, the British Fine Art tradition emerged belatedly and remained weak. In the 20th century, it was threatened by the growth of what I call a 'mega-visual tradition'; i.e., all the means and processes for producing and reproducing images, from modern advertising to television, which proliferate under monopoly capitalism. Thus the artist lost his cultural centrality and social function, and the great traditional media – painting, sculpture and drawing fell into decline.⁴

These days artists must know their public; they must know what the papers say.⁵

The art crisis of 1976 also initiated an entirely different approach to the problems identified by the various factions of the mainstream art world. For those on the far Left, the Williamsian materialism adopted by the Crisis Critics was held to be symptomatic of the class system that it was designed to critique. Questions such as 'Art for Whom?', and propositions such as 'Art for the People', failed since they continued to promote a bourgeois concept of 'art'. Strategies needed to be adopted which would not only undermine the conservative political capital of 'art' and the institutions that disseminate it, but which would enable the 'masses' to realise and intervene in the operations of panoptic power. The Crisis Critics populism failed to encourage a critical consciousness since they continued to adhere to the myth of the universal intellectual as cultural adviser. As English Situationist Ralf Rumney put it:

The organisers of the Whitechapel show [*Art for Society*] about 'political' art are the

¹ JEFF NUTTALL, "Sick", *Bomb Culture*, Paladin, London, 1970, p114.

² RICHARD CORK "Art for Whom?", *Art For Whom?*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1978, p10.

³ RALF RUMNEY, "Cultural Revolution or Art for Social Democracy?", *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p21.

⁴ PETER FULLER, "The Arts Council Collection", *Art Monthly*, Number 39, September 1980, p13.

⁵ STUART MORGAN, "What the Papers Say", *Artscribe* 18, July 1979, p19.

thought-police of official revolution. They fulfil a very similar role to that of the French Communist Party which collaborated with Pompidou to restore the bourgeois status quo which is the only environment in which Communist *parties* feel at home.⁶

Hockney and especially Kitaj also failed their audiences by continuing to operate comfortably within the constricting hierarchies of 'art' and the artworld, effectively aiding and abetting reactionary onslaught of Fuller and his followers. Despite their reforming zeal, radical academic artists never achieved an audience other than the modernist cognoscenti. What was needed was an art form that undermined the myth of the omnipotent universal intellectual, reconsidering power as something which circulates, as something never localised in anybody's hands, but exercised through a net-like organisation.

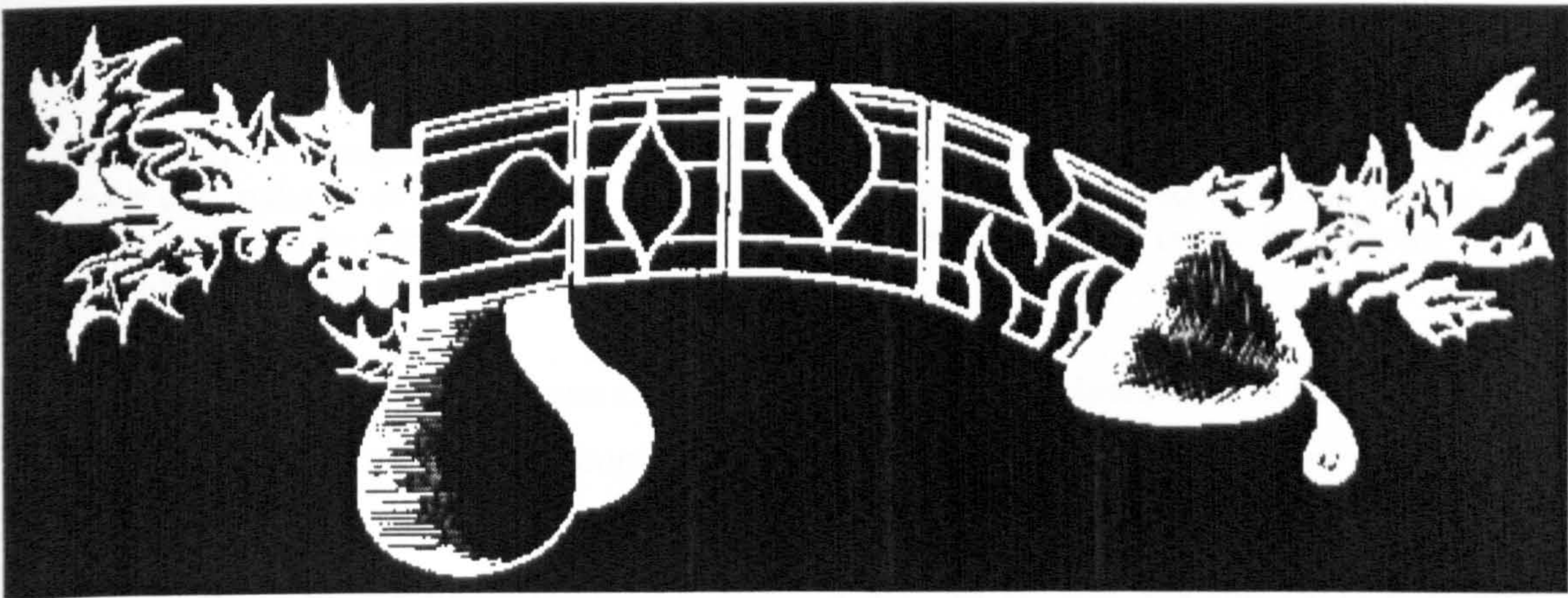


Figure 13.1 COUM Transmissions Logo (1974)

By 1976, the COUM Transmissions performance art ensemble, a group dedicated to non-aligned political mischief, were adept at provoking shock and outrage within the narrow boundaries of the art network. COUM were one of the few avant-garde performance groups to maintain many of the preoccupations of the 1960's underground while gradually moving their activities within the orbit of the artworld.⁷ Attending Solihull Public School in Warwickshire in 1965, Genesis P-Orridge⁸ began to read "books on Dada and related stuff. Very definitely, it was an emulation of that. [...] ...from the age of about sixteen, we used to get our school to allow us to organise what they called 'dances', but we used to put on all our records and had all sorts of objects around us. [...] ...very much happening stuff. Overloaded

⁶ RUMNEY, "The End of Art is Not the End", *Art Monthly*, Number 17, 1978, p4.

⁷ See NUTTALL, *Bomb Culture*, 1970.

⁸ Born Neil Andrew Megson 22nd February 1950, the reasons for his name change (by deed poll) are unclear. On one occasion he claimed that Genesis was his nickname at school, perhaps due to the fact that progressive rock was often associated with happenings in the popular imagination. P-Orridge was commonly attributed to the time when he had to survive on porridge as a penniless young artists having left Hull University. On other occasions, he claimed that the 'P' stood for "Pillow". As with the meaning of COUM, it would seem that P-Orridge favoured unstable signifiers, allowing the audience every opportunity to determine meanings.

images, noise and materials.”⁹ Over the next three years P-Orridge’s diverse interests (Aleister Crowley, Jack Keouac, James Joyce, Eric Satie, Albert Camus, Andy Warhol, William Burroughs, Rolling Stones, Frank Zappa, John Coltrane, The Velvet Underground) led him to become involved with the mixed-media group Worms, with whom he released an LP entitled *Early Worm*.¹⁰ On leaving school in 1968, P-Orridge studied Social Administration at Hull University for a year before touring with The Exploding Galaxy ‘kinetic theatre’ group (then known as Transmedia Exploration). Returning to Hull University the following year, P-Orridge met Cosey Fanni Tutti¹¹ with whom he established his own intermedia group, COUM Transmissions.¹² Exploiting his experience with Worms and Transmedia Exploration, P-Orridge began to envisage COUM as what would in effect become one of Britain’s first punk bands:

Basically, we thought, ‘everyone else is making these crummy LPs; we can do that too - we can make an even crummier LP’. We just wanted to make a record where you didn’t have to be a trained musician. [...] It had to be improvised music because we couldn’t play. By definition it was improvised.¹³

As COUM, their biggest pop success came when they supported Hawkwind in Bradford on October 22nd 1971. Despite their prophetic philosophy of pop, COUM’s actions became increasingly allied with the preoccupations of performance artists, becoming more carefully programmed and refined by the confines of site. “The music became less and less central, and the actions and images became more and more important. Eventually we went to a rock concert with no instruments, and that was how it shifted across.”¹⁴ As with their proto-punk musical experiments, COUM’s performance work remained primarily postmodernist in intent:

Performances, especially outdoors, are by their nature, more immediately inclusive. Benefiting from surprise and human curiosity. Often the bias against Modernism and an art context can thus be side-stepped.¹⁵ COUM believe you don’t need special training to produce and/or enjoy, worthwhile, significant and unique works. COUM

⁹ GENESIS P-ORRIDGE quoted in COLIN NAYLOR, “Couming Along”, *Art and Artists*, 10, 1975, p 22.

¹⁰ WORMS, *Early Worm*, Black Plastic Records, BRP 3471, 1967.

¹¹ Born Christine Newby, she changed her name to this playful, proto-’Bad Girl’ parody on the opera *Così fan Tutti*.

¹² “[COUM] doesn’t have any meaning except what it is now; it would be misleading to say what it originally stood for, which is a very hippie-type phrase [...] Cosmic Organicism of the Universal Molecular. We found it worked more accurately to let people decide for themselves. It became associated with everything done under that name. It was like Dada. Just a word.” P-ORRIDGE quoted in MORGAN, “What the Papers Say”, p17.

¹³ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, “Couming Along”, p25.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p22.

¹⁵ P-ORRIDGE & PETER CHRISTOPHERSON, “Annihilating Reality”, *Studio International*, July/August, 1976, p44.

demonstrate that there are no boundaries in any form. It has not all been done before, and that which has can still bear valid reinterpretation. The possibilities remain endless.¹⁶

COUM's performances began to engage directly with the de-definitional impulses which were the motivating force of sixties and seventies experimentation: site-specific installations, time-based work, performance and video; supplanting a narrow and inhospitable formalism with what Rosalind Krauss later termed an 'expanded field' for art. In the early 1970s, the group began to draw heavily upon the deliberately provocative, anti-art strategies of Fluxus. P-Orridge and Tutti undertook performance pieces for the Fluxshoe travelling show, an intermedia event curated by David Mayor in 1972-3. P-Orridge baffled pedestrians by dressing up as a *Caterpillar* and crawling from one gallery to another.

During their period of residency in Hull, P-Orridge and Tutti became a focus of attraction for refugees from the 60s underground in addition to gangs of skinheads and Hell's Angels, leading the local press and Police to 'suggest' that they move on.¹⁷ P-Orridge and Tutti decided that they would be more welcome in cosmopolitan London. After moving to a SPACE studio at 10 Martello Street, Hackney in 1973, COUM came fully within the orbit of the institutionalised avant-garde. On the suggestion of their friend Mike Scott, they successfully applied for a grant from the Arts Council's newly founded Performance Art Committee; (predominately made up of clients from the Drama Panel and the disbanded Experimental Projects Committee.) At the same time, Tutti began posing for soft porn magazines as a way of supplementing her income. In March 1974, this attracted the attention of Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson, then a junior assistant at Hipgnosis, the pioneering graphic design firm which produced album sleeves for numerous mid-70s rock combos.¹⁸ It was Christopherson who introduced the group to the performance work of Viennese Actionists such as Hermann Nitsch, from which point their performances became "characterised by an uncompromising commitment to physical extremes and improvisation"¹⁹ and the systematic breaking of taboos.

For their *Studios of Lust* performance at the Nuffield Foundation Art Gallery,

¹⁶ COUM TRANSMISSIONS, "Couming of Age" Typewritten Information Sheet, Undated, COUM *Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle* Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

¹⁷ "PIG NEWS: Since the obscenity bust we have been visited several times by Det. Bean and Det. Ward of the drug and vice squad to be reminded that although we ain't been in court yet they haven't forgotten and we will be done good and proper when it suits them. It seems that promises by certain policemen to see the whole of COUM in jail are shaping up. Ray Harvey is in prison for 15 months (leadsinger) for "assaulting a police officer" after which he "fell downstairs" on the ground floor of Central. Far-out John, the second drummer is inside for 23 months for a drugs bust." COUM Transmissions, "News from COUM Transmissions", *Frendz*, 13th - 28th October 1971.

¹⁸ Born at the end of February 1955 in Leeds, Christopherson was the youngest in large academic family living in Wimbledon and later in Durham. He was educated at Chorister School and later at Quaker co-ed boarding school at Ackworth. After A levels in sciences he went briefly to State University of New York, in Buffalo studying fiction writing, computer programming, theatre design and video. On returning to London in the Summer of '74 he joined Hipgnosis as a junior assistant, becoming a joint partner before the company split up in 1983.

¹⁹ SIMON FORD, "Doing P-Orridge", *Art Monthly*, June 1996, No. 197, p10.

University of Southampton in July 1975, COUM simply agreed on a general area of activity, and that they would be dressed ordinarily, so that they could not be distinguished from any members of the audience.

...there are three fairly ordinary people with a few ordinary objects - and then, bit by bit, we lead them [the audience], across ... Things start to go wrong; things start to turn into something odd, slightly strange. Not quite normal. [...] Bit by bit you would see fairly radical changes: Cosey gradually sliced off all her clothes, and when she had sliced off her dress, tights and knickers, it revealed a big scar as if she had been sliced with a knife. [...] Then it would continue until there were anal syringes and candles, feathers and old Tampax hanging from my backside; my trousers were around my ankles, and I would masturbate whilst reading the [sex] book, and more and more blood was pouring from my mouth. Sleazy by this time was poking at his burns and grazes with a needle, all undressed, and Cosey would be lighting candles and placing them on pieces of her cut-off clothes, and picking off her fake scar until the wound just seemed to disappear. [...] We didn't register any expressions of pain or shock, so there was nothing to grasp onto, a feeling that nothing mattered really. [...] Just like at the beginning it looked like nothing was going to happen. Usually at the end there's a very quiet, thoughtful silence, like a church. When they talk, they talk in whispers. The atmosphere generated is so strong that nobody wants to break it.²⁰

In numerous related performances, Tutti would cut off a schoolgirl skirt or a body stocking, (aka Yoko Ono's principal of transformation through destruction), rubbing a red substance into tears in her tights. With prolonged, embarrassed looking, Tutti's wounds could be ascertained to be prosthetics or the application of greasepaint, eliciting the squirming discomfort of desire mixed with revulsion. Tutti frequently dislodged the supposed truth value of feminist body art in such a manner, creating intentionally abject special effects to replicate self-mutilation performance, covering herself in jam and feathers for her satirical *Woman's Roll* (1976) performance at the A.I.R. Gallery in 1976. In this, she refused to communicate according to the codes of what was becoming a conventional manner. Instead, she acted on her experience as a stripper, titillating her audience's voyeuristic impulse to stare at the private and the intimate.

Tutti's disguises of an erotic life revealed themselves in guises that suggested that COUM were not simply borrowing the conventions of mainstream body-based performance art. Indeed, COUM were not performance artists, they were Urmen, and glorified themselves as such: "Art must be concerned with death, fear, sex, humiliation. Obsessionally self-destructive we have lost contact with our shamanic selves. How to prove we are alive. Sadism, murder, revelation of our terrors. [...] Affirmation of existence is art. All is contradiction to understand is to lie."²¹ For P-Orridge, self-destructive violence is an extension

²⁰ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, "Couming Along", p25.

²¹ COUM TRANSMISSIONS, "What Has COUM to Mean? : Thee Theory Behind COUM", Typewritten Statement, Undated, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990. COUM's follow up performance was even more harrowing: "We have been getting viler in our actions too. Made a video tape called COUMDENSATION MUCUS which was mentioned in the thee letter you printed in this issue. Has me slumped in a corner of a white room in black slumkid clothes. Like an empty sleazy flat or mental home cell. Then gradually E end up with lit candles, old

of a deep pessimism about society and human nature. Humanity is represented as isolated, impotent, and numbed by its inundation with mass media images. P-Orridge's answer to this in *What has COUM to Mean?* comes from a Nietzschean metaphysical framework, seeing affirmation of "identity through action" as essential in a dying culture, and defining life as the imposition of will on our surroundings - a definition identical to Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. However, while Nietzsche claimed that everything in the category of art is also in the larger category of things that affirm existence, P-Orridge held that *anything* that affirms existence is art. Since this left him with no other criteria for defining art as opposed to non-art, he significantly widened the boundaries of what can be art. P-Orridge also added another element to Nietzsche's ideas: having lost contact with our inner spirituality and our outer senses, the only object left for the imposition of our will is our selves, and the only way to escape the will of death is, in effect, to take over the role of death through self-destruction.

In line with this, ritual purification, involving both literal and symbolic elements including bloodletting, defecation, urinary actions, and primitive body decoration were brought into contradiction with a great self-awareness concerning the inherently contrived nature of their actions. On the one hand Cozey would claim that the work was "not performance (entertainment) but action art."²² P-Orridge likewise asserted Tutti's thesis that "COUM is not 'about' entertainment," but concluded with the contradictory statement that it was "concerned with *direct, symbolic* interpretation of actions to realise a uniquely personal perception."²³ Hence, COUM simultaneously incorporated two antithetical authorial intentions: one anti-aesthetic, anti-theoretical 'direct' strategy designed to subvert the artworld by denying any responsibility for their work, and one 'symbolic' strategy whereby actions were strategically created to achieve acceptance by the artworld. The fact that COUM's actions did not appear to reach any conclusion created a resonance which permitted the dominance of their revisions, affecting and subverting the artworld through art, an achievement desired by artists and anti-artists alike.

Indeed, COUM's ability to manipulate their bodies was, in effect, a manifestation of their ability to fashion reality. The group claimed that they found "it hard to define between TV image of the real and the movies they mirror."²⁴ Accordingly, COUM's coded actions

Tampax, syringes of piss and milk, feathers ALL hanging out of my arsehole. E countimes remove one and chew or lick it. Camera fades every so often to Sleazy who has deep gash on his arm which he is stitching up with ordinary needle and thread without anaesthetic and as he pulls needle, his skin is pulled upwards and blood and puss oozes out. Later he stitches pictures of young boys fucking and mutilated in accidents to his sewn up battered flesh forearm. In background are sounds of radio and muted voices as if coumone is in flat next door aware of this scenario, yet unbothered. It is a truly really beautiful videotape." P-ORRIDGE, "A Letter [to ANNA BANANA]", *Vile*, Volume 3, Number 2, Summer 1977, p30-31.

²² COSEY FANNI TUTTI, "Artist's Statement" Typewritten Information Sheet, May 1975, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

²³ P-ORRIDGE, "Artist's Statement" Typewritten Information Sheet, 27th August 1974, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990. (My emphasis).

²⁴ COUM TRANSMISSIONS, "What Has COUM to Mean? : Thee Theory Behind COUM", Typewritten

were designed to glorify the seemingly magical basis behind the artistic process, a process that remained inaccessible to the audience. Initially, “the essential process of reflection focused the viewer’s awareness, not on the affinities between himself and the performer, but the intrinsic sameness of self and performer.”²⁵ After a period of ‘orderly’ behaviour, however, P-Orridge might begin to nonchalantly drink his own urine, leading on to the breaking of as many taboos as possible.

In Amsterdam we did a performance in the red-light district. The people in the theatre asked, “What kind of lighting do you want?” and we said, “Oh, just put on all the red lights.” Then we played tapes of Charles Manson’s LP, *Lie*, cut-up with soundtracks of trains going through thunderstorms, and we went through all different kinds of fetishes. Sleazy cut his throat and had to kind of do a tourniquet on his throat, and Cosey and I did this thing of spitting at each



other and then licking all the spit off, and then licking each other’s genitals, and then having sexual intercourse while her hair was set on fire with candles. There was an audience of around 2,000 people. Each day it got heavier, so that on Easter Sunday I was crucified on a wooden cross, whipped with 2 bullwhips, covered in human vomit and chicken wings and chicken legs, while I had to hold burning torches - people in the audience could hear the skin burning on my hands. [Figure 13.2] And then I urinated down Cosey’s legs while she stuck a lighted candle up her vagina, so there were flames coming out of her vagina. Just ordinary everyday ways of avoiding the commercials on the television.²⁶

In all, a COUM action would take the audience’s ‘customary’ behaviour and slowly transform it into a series of ‘deviant’ actions, resulting in a subversion of ‘ordinary’ behaviour which the audience would be powerless to prevent. In this sense the audience became a powerless counter-movement to COUM’s self-referentiality.

Hence, while mimicking the spontaneous, plotless character of a Cageian happening, COUM’s performances left little or no room for audience participation other than in an experiential capacity, the audience’s sense of intimate involvement being enforced only by the matter of their close proximity with the performance. The subtle schism with Cageianism was equally prevalent in P-Orridge’s conception of the artist. For Cage, the audience was more than an equal partner in the creation of his work, indeed, “the hearing of the piece of music is his own action - [...] the music, so to speak, is his, rather than the composer’s.”²⁷ Despite the

Statement, Undated, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

²⁵ HUGH ADAMS, “COUM in Southampton: Lay Assumptions”, *Studio International*, Vol. 192, No. 982, July/August 1976.

²⁶ P-ORRIDGE, “Letter”, Undated, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

²⁷ JOHN CAGE quoted in ROSELEE GOLDBERG, “John Cage and Merce Cunningham”, *Performance:*

alleged 'ordinariness' of COUM as performers/actors, P-Orridge conceived artists to be "people who are more like magicians or alchemists of a different sort, people who are delving deeper than art problems, art structures and aesthetics and so on as a kind of logical functional activity."²⁸ For COUM there were no transparent forms of knowledge innocent of coercion and repression. Given that power is exercised through the production of 'truth', COUM's cabalistic art rituals metaphorically battled against both the mass media and its semio-artist demystifiers. On the one hand, this strategy owed much to the harder-edge of 60s counter culture from which COUM had emerged:

If your communication is to result in action, in change of direction, then argument, McLuhans's 'hot' information, the communication used by CND, by all political protesters, ostensibly by all politicians, is useless. The advertisers had the people moving their way. What was required was an explosive planted straight into the human subconscious to blow it off course.²⁹

Yet COUM also had much in common with the numerous self-mutilation performances of the 1970s, most of which were officially endorsed by the International arts establishment, as opposed to being part of the 'underground'.³⁰ Such performances indicated a shift back towards the notion of the artist as performer, as the writerly focus and creative source of the action. As P-Orridge remarked in 1975: "The meaning somehow comes from the repetition or from the personality imbuing meaning into that action - not the action itself."³¹ In line with this trend, COUM seemed to shift the focus on the artist as performer in ever more disturbing directions:

The pathological murderer, sex offender, is affirming identity through action, we are the same, there's no gap anymore, art is high crime, high crime is art without theoretics. Actions with offal, sex and young girls when he was a kid; 23 deaths in his final action; Manson creepy crawling to status of Andy Warhol; Manson's integrity excels Warhol's. We all strive to distract ourselves from an ugly truth. The truth is simply this. We all die. We are just idiot humans without the sense to admit we spend

Live Art 1909 to the Present, Thames & Hudson, 1979, p81.

²⁸ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, "Couming Along", p23.

²⁹ NUTTALL, "Sick", *Bomb Culture*, p154.

³⁰The Franco-Italian Gina Pane set the agenda for the ritualised sadomasochistic assault on the body in 1968, producing actions such as *Action Sentimentale* (1973) in which she pressed a row of razor blades into her forearm. In the same period came American Vito Acconci's *Rubbing Piece* (1970), rubbing his left forearm with the fingers of his right hand until he had produced a sore. In 1972 Stuart Brisley performed *And for Today... Nothing* at the Gallery House, sitting two hours a day for two weeks in a bath of murky water containing lumps of rotting meat. In 1974 the Californian performer Chris Burden allowed himself to be shot, crucified on the roof of a Volkswagen Beetle, kicked down two flights of stairs, and attempted to drown himself. The formally sanctioned movement reached an alarming peak at the 1975 Paris Biennale when the Yugoslavian Marina Abramovic inflicted pain on herself with both knives and schizophrenic drugs, and the Austrian performance artist Schwarzkogler killed himself during an art ritual.

³¹ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, "Couming Along", p23.

our lives conning purpose from random occupations of our energy.³²

In this, P-Orridge was also verifying the transformation towards the 'pop-Situationist' interpretation of body art dominant in punk. Particularly proto-punk was P-Orridge's debt to the 'active nihilism' of the 60s underground, resuscitating their interest in "the praxis of deviants - psychotics, the mentally collapsed, (it was somewhat hip to have been through a mental asylum) and petty crooks"³³ in order to sell it to an institutionalised artworld that had previously been too preoccupied with minimal and conceptual austerities to take any notice. It is apparent that P-Orridge deliberately appropriated these concerns in a manner which would make them consumable by the straight artworld. Like Gina Pane, P-Orridge followed the established definition of body art, stressing the body's weakness, "the tragic and pitiless servitude of its limitations, of its wear and tear and its precariousness,"³⁴ but chose to couch this discussion by establishing a deliberately offensive comparison with Charles Manson's sex crimes. As was the case with the underground of the late 60s, this interest in sex killers such as Manson lay in their aptitude to arouse an extreme response, to leave people in a position where they could not switch the situation off as a joke.³⁵ However, rather than a purely nihilistic attempt to obliterate values, such analogies masked a peculiar manifestation of the romantic concept of purity. COUM's unrelenting goal of displaying and breaking the most taboo, the most offensive, and the most disgusting things possible stemmed from a puritan desire to cleanse the dirt of the social structure by fire, wallowing in what was the most impure in order to violate the corrupt, habitual world of signs and morals that functions as a numbing shell between people and 'reality'. COUM's paradoxical quest for 'purity' and 'truth' explains their obsessive use of bodily excretions such as blood, milk, urine, and faeces. Bodily excretions are the most organic and therefore most honest and 'real' aspects of an individual. Since they originate in the interior rather than the surface of the person, they are allegedly free of social or cultural values. While it is clearly impossible to return to phenomenological 'reality' by abandoning the semiotic realm of created meaning (the very charge made by academic semio-art against the School of London), COUM's resistance to reified language was fairly typical of the late 1970s artist's 'recognition' of the corruption and falsity of signification. As we shall see, however, tampering with the shock effects of sex crime in the late 1970s was less of an effective route for state funded performance artists to challenge the hegemony of the mass-media's manipulative sensationalism, especially given that it was over

³² P-ORRIDGE, "Letter, October 1975", in "COUM", *Arte Inglese Oggi 1960-76*, British Council, Milan, 1976, p423. Reprinted as "COUM 34 Missions", *Flash Art* (Milan), December 1976, p36.

³³ DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, Calderwood 15, pamphlet, Glasgow, c.1978 reprinted as "The End of Music: The Revolution of Everyday Alienation", in STEWART HOME ed., *What is Situationism?: A Reader*, AK Press, Edinburgh, 1996, p67.

³⁴ GINA PANE quoted in BRANDON TAYLOR, *The Art of Today*, Everyman Art Library, 1995, p29.

³⁵ The claim that murder is art was made by Thomas de Quincey in the 1820s in an article for *Blackwood's Magazine* entitled "Murder Considered as Fine Art" and later by Andre Breton.

ten years since the “brash and busty *Sun*”³⁶ had risen on Fleet Street.

Figure 13.3 *Vile* San Francisco, USA, Vol. 1 No.1, ‘Valentines Edition’ February 1974. Mail art magazine featuring P-Orridge’s friend Monte Cazazza on cover.



Up until this point, P-Orridge had been involved with the mail art movement in an effort to circumvent the elitism of the artworld (despite the fact that COUM were the first group to gratefully receive a grant from the Performance Art Panel of the ACGB). The mail art network adopted the long cherished strategy of the avant-garde to break down the distinctions between artists and non-artists, creating a spirit of openness between correspondents.³⁷ Despite their aim to de-commodify the artwork,³⁸ mail artists produced artist's books, rubber stamps,³⁹ postcards, postage stamps, and Xerox art⁴⁰ in addition to mail art journals such as San-Francisco's *Vile*⁴¹ and the Canadian tabloid *File*. When requested by his Martello Street neighbour Helen Chadwick to provide a retrospective of his work for the 1979 Hayward Annual, P-Orridge presented three portfolios of letters and collages. This material was sent to him by three associates living in Hollywood, Portland and San Francisco (Skot Armst, Monte Cazazza and Al Ackerman⁴²) during his six-year involvement with the movement. In the context of wall-hung canvases and free-standing sculptures the folios were almost invisible, displayed as they were, beneath a window overlooking the river Thames. In line with this understated hang, P-Orridge insisted that these letters “were not produced as art, they are how three people really are and how they respond to where they live and who they know. Precisely because it was not ever intended as art, because it is minus the awful demands of the Art Market, Art World, Art Career it becomes simple, curious, open but really ... art.”⁴³ While P-Orridge posthumously saw mailing as a means of dismantling the barrier between art

³⁶ NORMAN SHRAPNEL, “Introduction”, *The Seventies: Britain's Inward March*, Constable, London, 1980, p16.

³⁷ See: CHUCK WELCH, *Networking Currents: Contemporary Mail Art Subjects and Issues*, Sandbar Willow Press, Boston, 1986.

³⁸ See: HOME, *Plagiarism: Art as Commodity and Strategies for its Negation*, Aporia Press, London, 1988.

³⁹ Visit: TAM Rubberstamp Archive http://www.geocities.com/Paris/4947/rub_arch.html

⁴⁰ See: PATRICK FIRPO et al., *Copy Art: The First Complete Guide to the Copy Machine*, Richard Marek Publishing, New York, 1978.

⁴¹ See: ANNA BANANA, *About Vile*, Banana Productions, Vancouver, Canada, 1983.

⁴² AL ACKERMAN, *The Blaster Al Ackerman Omnibus*, New York: Feh! Press, 1994.

⁴³ P-ORRIDGE/COUM TRANSMISSIONS, “Genesis P-Orridge”, Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, (13th April) 1979, p27.

and life, his own mail art was infamous for precisely the kind of 'Art' qualities he allegedly despised.⁴⁴ For example, *Blackmailing*, a mailing of fifty black postcards to randomly chosen local townspeople, bore the sado-masochistic streak characteristic of COUM's performances, drawing inspiration from the fetish art-actions such as Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971) and more generally on the taboo-breaking examination of sex and violence found in most of the underground press in the permissive 60s (*Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, *Birth Press*, *OZ*, etc.). Indeed, immediately prefiguring the scandal over the ICA *Prostitution* exhibition, P-Orridge's aesthetic predilection for fetish art was to initiate one of COUM's most infamous actions, *G.P.O. vs. G.P.O.*, held in Highbury Corner Magistrates Court on the 7th of April 1976.

In the mid 70s, P-Orridge had been freely experimenting with photomontage on postcards of London tourist attractions. P-Orridge often mocked these designs by pasting over small pictures derived from pornographic magazines, on one occasion transforming a postcard depicting Buckingham Palace and the Queen by adding a glossy picture of a hand groping a woman's buttocks. On the other side he wrote, "The lady (Queen) on the front has her mouth shut because her teeth are filed to points." Of this P-Orridge wrote:

I use text as purely graphic, verbal abstraction. In much contemporary art words are juxtaposed with images and photographs. I do the same in small exchangeable format. (It amuses me to parody real world / art world).⁴⁵

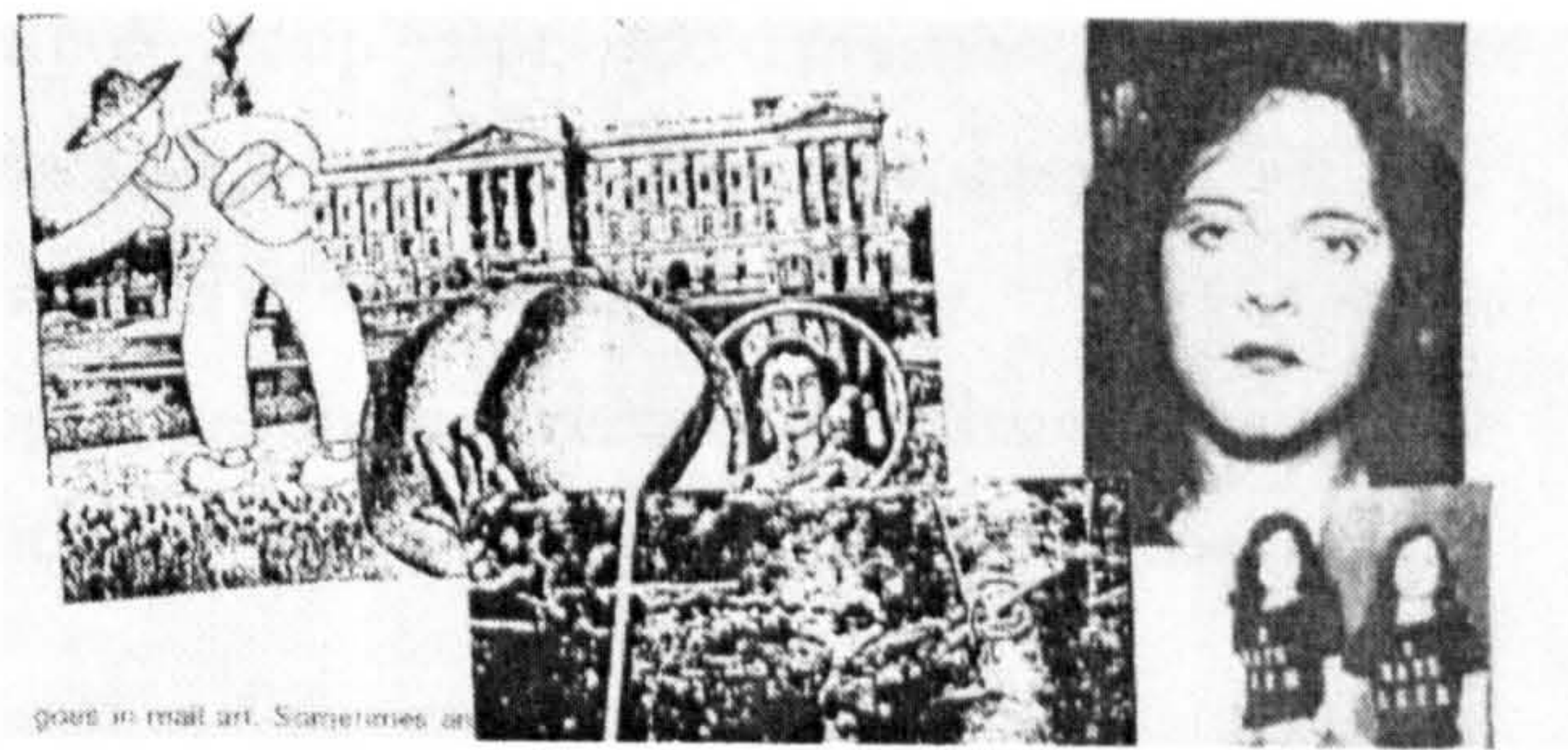


Figure 13.4 Genesis P-Orridge, *Filed to Points*, (top left), (1976).

Hence, while P-Orridge mimicked ideas familiar to semio-art photographers, like A&L, he was highly suspicious of the critical pretensions which resulted of its restricted distribution network (the University and the artworld). In many ways, he might even be seen to have attempted to create similar forms of 'Black Propaganda'. P-Orridge's attempt to democratise critical forms of photomontage by way of the mail art network was an uncompromising example of Jo Spence's advocacy of a radicalised type of 'amateurism'. P-Orridge, however, aimed to destroy the field of interpretation, the kind of altruistic critical agendas which would frame Spence's educational photography and phototherapeutic programmes.

⁴⁴ "The simple nomination of an object as art appears sufficient qualification of that nominating agent as an artist, [but] the promiscuous use of this causality on an extensional and intentional level could endanger the historicity and meaningfulness of art. The fact that 'artist' is not axiomatically defined is no reason for its not being .. axiomatically defined." PHILIP PILKINGTON and DAVID RUSHERSON, "Don Judd's Dictum and its Emptiness", *Analytical Art*, no.1, July 1971, p4.

⁴⁵ P-ORRIDGE, "Statement by Genesis P-Orridge to his Solicitor April 5th 1976", *G.P.O. versus G.P.O: A Chronicle of Mail Art on Trial* Compiled by Genesis P-Orridge, Ecart, Switzerland, 1976.

Girlie mags and modern paintings contain key symbols that are exclusive to the initiated, that rely on a knowledge of their context and references, a technical involvement in their scene. [...] What sexual fantasy is to the person in the street, art is to the artist. [...] It is a form of Pavlovian conditioned response. [I] desire to negate this formula of control and response, highlighting its absurdity.⁴⁶

For P-Orridge, radical amateurism demanded a humorous assault on categorisation and intellectualisation. In many ways this served to challenge the pretensions of semio-art and rectify the solicitous nature of educational photography by transforming them into the kind of jocose forms of insubordination which Spence would later term 'cultural sniping'. However, P-Orridge's bold assault on the field of interpretation created a number of problems. Although he completely abandoned 'classrooms' and 'discussion groups', his negations were enacted merely as a form of closed correspondence between selected members of the mail art community. Even in comparison with the rather limited audience for Spence's work, P-Orridge's mail art was immoderately exclusive, an unmitigatedly private method of communication. Spence was more able to convincingly pronounce that the work she and Rosy Martin produced was "ringing bells - very, very noisy bells - in a way that images, say, on fetishisation accompanied by abstract analysis intimidate the audience into saying nothing at all. When we have put our images up the whole group erupts into discussion. That is where the democratisation comes in, in a sense. Because we are not hoping to remain behind the theory teachers, we are hoping to shift the agenda of what students ask for."⁴⁷ Although, like Spence, P-Orridge derided the vogue for appending abstruse theoretical texts with fetishistic imagery, he did so by personalising the political (as opposed to politicising the personal).

COUM have nothing to say and they're saying it.
Make your own theory.
COUM have no game to play and they're playing it.⁴⁸

By maintaining a bluntly absurdist stance, P-Orridge failed to establish the wider contexts in which his work might retain a critical stance or challenge viewers to shift the goalposts for themselves. His postcards were eminently compatible with this attitude in that they contained forms of pornographic writing (extracts from *Whitehouse* magazine) that are notoriously rigid, a disallow of the Semio-artist's ability to manipulate words and images and suggest new meanings: "to my delight I felt his tongue running up and down my slit"; "we bucked and heaved, our mingled juices soaking our groins." P-Orridge's threat to the 'critical' artworld was coarse and vulgar, a mentality limited to uncritical language. While the arbitrariness of

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ JO SPENCE quoted in JOHN ROBERTS, "Interview with Jo Spence", *Selected Errors: Writings on Art and Politics 1981-90*, Pluto Press, London, p143.

⁴⁸ COUM TRANSMISSIONS, "What Has COUM to Mean? : Thee Theory Behind COUM", Typewritten Statement, Undated, *COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle* Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

verbal and visual language allowed for P-Orridge's manipulation, his control over what was ultimately signified was tenuous at best. COUM were unwilling to fully manipulate their audience's conclusions, that is, the artist's authority, once the work was in production, was ignored:

COUM project their lives and emotions into a public arena without any preconceptions as to how these may develop, given the variables of time, audience reaction and intuitive improvisation. [...] They state no position implicitly, simply exposing themselves as they are to realise the activities that create a moment that is both precious and expendable.⁴⁹

P-Orridge's mail art affirmed that he could not write himself into his work and hope to avert the pitfalls of certain readings. Far from being intimidated into "saying nothing at all", the uninitiated who came into contact with his work were simply offended.

On the 11th of October 1975, the *Filed to Points* postcard caught the attention of a Post Office Sorter in Hackney. Given that he always supplied a return address, P-Orridge was easily traced to his home in Hackney. He gave the following statement to the Police on the 21st of November:

I am a professional mail artist with work documented by various books, magazines and in current exhibitions. My work is supported by the Arts Council of Great Britain. The two cards were sent to other artists and I did not expect anyone other than the addressees to read them.

Figure 13.5 G.P-O vs. G.P.O. Genesis P-Orridge and his supporters outside Highbury Magistrates Court, London, 5th April 1976.

From this it would appear that P-Orridge regarded his work as a 'professional' practice, sponsored by the Arts Council and aimed at the initiated. It is also probable that he did not intend his mail art to manufacture a publicity situation, indeed, the accusations of indecency could not have



come at a worse time for COUM who were at the height of their career as 'professional' Arts Council artists. P-Orridge was summonsed to attend trial on the 23rd February, yet was due to represent the British avant-garde by opening *English Art Today* in Milan on the 22nd with their performance *Towards the Crystal Ball*. His request for the trial to be postponed to the 5th of

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

April was excepted, allowing the Police to open his mail and seize three more 'obscene' postcards.

This setback allowed P-Orridge to develop a defence case and transform the event into a full-blown happening. Before going on trial for sending five obscene collages, he attempted to enlist as many people associated with the avant-garde and the official artworld as possible, sending wedding-style invitations, press releases, and replicas of his summonses, application for legal aid (refused), and the allegedly obscene postcards to 162 guests, including Chris Carter, Anna Banana, Al Ackerman, Skot Armst, John Latham, Monte Cazazza, Richard Cork, Caroline Tisdall, Ted Little, Leo Castelli, Angela Flowers, The Serpentine Gallery, The Whitechapel Gallery, *Art Forum*, Brian Eno, John Peel, *Melody Maker*, *N. M. E.*, and *Playboy* magazine.

That P-Orridge had decided to take a more committed stance is clear in so far as the *Solicitor's Statement* on the day of the trial sees him question the claim of professional status that he made in his *Police Statement*:

No high technique, just scissors, glue and photos. I want to be sure that at least theoretically, anyone could do it, a similar thing. I want to be part of popular culture, involved with everyday life not an intellectual artist, in an ivory tower, thinking I am special, revered and monumental.

Richard Cork and Ted Little, director of the ICA, were both present at the trial to defend P-Orridge's actions, while Bridget Riley and William Burroughs had written in support. To Cork, P-Orridge's action was like a literal manifestation of Conrad Atkinson's "exhibits in a court room prosecution"⁵⁰

This time, however, the 'audience' *was* side-tracked, by aesthetics and dazzling performances, despite P-Orridge's democratic intimations. In many ways G.P.O. vs. G.P-O paralleled the moral vs. aesthetic debates of Ruskin vs. Whistler, and like Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, it later became a published artwork in its own right, *G.P.O. versus G.P-O: A Chronicle of Mail Art on Trial Coumpiled by Genesis P-Orridge*, Ecart, Switzerland, 1976. P-Orridge, the aesthete, was resplendent in Lurex suit, red socks, silver fingernails and unorthodox haircut - a triangle having been shaved from his forehead to a point in the centre of his crown. Mrs Colwell, the arbiter of moral standards, wore a blue

⁵⁰ CORK, "Assault by the Facts of Life", *Evening Standard*, London, 25th April 1974, p32. "1976 was the year I commissioned Genesis to write an article for *Studio* in the 'Performance Issue'. I remember being quite disturbed by this article and wondering whether some of the illustrations should be used because they were quite raw, but decided in the end that I shouldn't start censoring like that. Then I started getting to know him a bit, and quite liked him. He used to turn up at the office and have a talk and Cosey would come too. Then he told me about the postcard, which, looking back, was actually quite innocuous. It was some postal worker wasn't it, complaining about the Queen? Ludicrous! Anyway, he said 'my lawyer says we need an art critic to come along and say that I'm a brilliant artist.' I don't think that I was required to talk about his morals, I think I was required to talk about his worth as a maker of art. I do remember we all regarded it as hugely entertaining. We saw the whole thing as a charade on the part of the law, one couldn't begin to take it seriously. But there was an astonished awareness that the law actually had teeth, in this respect, and could conceivably cause damage. £100 in those days was quite a lot of money." Interview with CORK, Queens Park, London, February 1998.

twin-set. The case was handled in classic obscenity style. Confusion reigned throughout: the Scottish magistrate, Mrs. Colwell, insisted on calling P-Orridge 'Mr Porridge' while the Post Office thought he was a 'male artist.' Mr. Ridgeway, the Post Office lawyer anxiously asked every witness if a 'work of art' could ever be considered indecent. David Offenbach and Geoffrey Robertson were P-Orridge's defence lawyers, neither of them unfamiliar with obscenity cases having defended OZ magazine. True to liberal form, they maintained that Mr. Ridgeway's distinctions between art and pornography were purely a matter of bourgeois convention.

A favourable article appearing in soft-porn magazine *National News* accurately transferred COUM's advocacy of an aesthetics of reception to a legal context:

Since Mr. P-Orridge admitted sending the cards in question yet pleaded not guilty on the grounds that the cards were not indecent, the onus was on the prosecuting solicitor to prove that the designs/words on the cards were 'indecent'. When the prosecution solicitor asked rhetorically: "Is this design not indecent?" he was asking an entirely inappropriate question, for indecency is not something inherent in an object. Therefore it is simply not possible to prove definitely that a thing or display is in itself indecent, and while this situation is an intolerable one for the general public, it is equally intolerable for the judge or magistrate. If he accepts that 'Exhibit A' cannot definitely be proven either 'decent' or 'indecent', then his function and the function of that court has been severely eroded.⁵¹

Indecency has negative connotations due to the heritage of Classical philosophy which privileges signifying elements, which are aligned with reason, over phenomenological elements, which are aligned with the appetites. Since reason is considered a 'higher' sensibility than the appetites, violence, sex, or any spectacular element that may appeal to our appetites are seen as less worthwhile than elements which appeal to our intellectual or aesthetic sensibilities. To appeal to these 'higher' sensibilities, things like sex or violence must further the meaning of the work or its aesthetic appreciation rather than existing just for the immediate pleasure that they give to the audience. Therefore, to prove that the sexual and/or violent content of their work is not 'indecent' artists often assert that it is intended to further their artistic point. Had P-Orridge completely refused to take this bourgeois option, he would indeed have demonstrated that what determines whether something is 'indecent' is its context and implied purpose. Both of these are subjective, so a judgement on whether something is 'indecent' cannot be absolute. However, as it stands, P-Orridge's contradictory Police Statements ('professional mail artist vs. anyone could do it) leave the critical and legal success of the trial in disrepute. The

⁵¹ ANON (COLIN NAYLOR?), "The Remarkable Case of Genesis P-Orridge and the Dirty Postcards", *National News*, Issue 3, Kelerfern, London, 1976. There is a possibility that this article was written by or paraphrased from Colin Naylor as it closely resembles many of the ideas contained in the following unpublished article: "What is indecency? It is not a thing but an event. An event between outside stimuli (the object) and a person's perception of that stimuli. This is supported by the legal definition of indecency as 'that which offends sickens or revolts someone.' [...] Therefore: it is not possible to prove definitely that a thing or display or any outside stimulus is in itself 'indecent.'" COLIN NAYLOR, "The Case for Indecency", Typewritten Article, 8th April 1976, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.

Magistrates understandably unconvinced of his incoherent case for a re-trial by jury, P-Orridge was found guilty on five charges for contravening Section 11 of the 1953 Post Office act, and fined £100 plus £20 costs. The trial was precedent-setting in that it established that a person can be prosecuted for sending 'obscene' postcards even though they might cause no offence, testifying to P-Orridge's belief that "the power in this world rests with the people who have access to the most information and control of that information."⁵² As a nihilistic satire on the hegemony of the law, P-Orridge fought back with amusing ineffectuality, manufacturing a new rubber stamp bearing the legend: 'UNSOLICITED PORNOGRAPHY'.

The failure in court was grist to COUM's mill:

E have lots of VILE pictures coming my way these daze. Unbelievable amounts, pathology, corpses, open fani fuck dribble pics, pasolinis corpse pictures actually scrounged from the coroner's office in Rome through a guy we know there. And pictures of ourselves in actions that have been known to make people feel sick. [...] Now we are really underground again, finance is harder, we survive by prostitution in every form. But that's integral to our way of death anyway.⁵³

So extreme were COUM's actions that veteran self-mutilators Chris Burden and John Baldessari walked out of their performance of *Cease to Exist* - held at NAME in the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Arts on 23rd November 1976 - saying that it was 'disgusting', 'sickening' and 'not art.' "E told you we don't do art butter you wouldn't believe me; take Chris Boredom's word for it, he MUST be right",⁵⁴ P-Orridge acidly remarked.

⁵² P-ORRIDGE in WILLIAM FURLONG, "Four Interviews: Genesis P-Orridge", Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, p15.

⁵³ P-ORRIDGE, "A Letter [to ANNA BANANA]", *Vile*, Volume 3, Number 2, Summer 1977, p31. Heavily influenced by Aleister Crowley's system of 'magick' - which teaches that language is magic and that we should avoid writing the most common words in their original spellings. - P-Orridge's mailings made extensive use of a personal vernacular full of systematic misspellings and alternate capitalisations. The manipulation of everyday phrases was intended to destroy speaking without thought, consciously changing language to meet his needs. However, P-Orridge's language has since become the house language of Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, rather defeating its original purpose as a semi-private language.

⁵⁴ P-ORRIDGE, "Buster Cleveland vs. Genesis P.: A Friendly Exchange [Letter dated 24th January 1977]", *Vile*, Volume 3, Number 2, Summer 1977, p32. "In Los Angeles, in 1976, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (LAICA), Cosey and I did a performance where I was naked, I drank a bottle of whiskey and stood on a lot of tacks. And then I gave myself enemas with blood, milk and urine, and then broke wind so a jet of blood milk and urine combined shot across the floor in front of Chris Burden and assorted visual artists. I then licked it off the floor which was a not-clean concrete floor. Then I got a 10-inch nail and tried to swallow it, which made me vomit. Then I licked the vomit off the floor and Cosey helped me lick the vomit off the floor. And she was naked and trying to sever her vagina her navel with a razor blade-- well, she cut it from her vagina to her navel with a razor blade, and she injected blood into her vagina which then trickled out, and we sucked the blood from her vagina into a syringe and injected it into eggs painted black, which we then tried to eat. And we vomited again, which we then used for enemas. Then I needed to urinate, so I urinated into a large glass bottle and drank it all while it was still warm. (This was all improvised.) And then we gradually crawled to each other, licking the floor clean. ('cause we don't like to leave a mess, y'know; after all, it's not fair to insult an art gallery). Chris Burden, who's known for being outrageous, walked out with his girlfriend, saying: "This is not art, this is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen, and these people are sick." P-ORRIDGE, "Letter", Undated, COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990. Burden was uneasy at being forced into an 'incorrect' type of viewing. In his self-mutilation performances, the

Indeed, COUM had went to some lengths to encourage the notion that actions such as *Cease to Exist*, were 'real' rather than symbolic or artistic. Yet this in turn, of course, was simply another form of aesthetic conceit. As Burden and Baldessari left along with a fifth of the audience, unhappy at the almost complete lack of aesthetic distance, their departure was recorded on video as part of the event while Burgin's statement was made into a promotional postcard for *VILE* magazine. [Figure 13.6]

"You should have seen us at L.A.I.C.A. in Los Angeles. Chris Burden, John Baldessari and a girlfriend walked after 15 minutes out the door saying, its sickening and disgusting and its not art."

Genesis P. Orridge, *VILE* magazine

Although COUM's performances were becoming ever more offensive in intent, for P-Orridge the problem of how to reach further outwith the insular confines of the artworld remained a pressing one. On the one hand, P-Orridge advocated the use of the mass media, maintaining that "fame is a medium, not a phenomenon. You have writing, painting and sculpture and fame. And certain people are very good at operating as ... fame art-objects, if you like. They, themselves, have become the medium. The medium is being famous."⁵⁵ P-Orridge, nonetheless, was aware of the limitations of this position:

I believe the worst problem art now faces is an industrial one, in two parts SAMENESS, the onward progression toward uniformity, the suppression of individuality, the virus of the mass media, mass production culture. Clone society if you like. MYSTIFICATION, in keeping a monotonous culture and society under a control process one creates a facade of experts guarding knowledge information. The public at large feel, I am sure, that art is not for them. Artists have deliberately made them feel inferior, excluded through not being trained in understanding of art. De-mystification is our duty.⁵⁶

This presented a major challenge. While COUM's actions were seen to lie somehow within 'Art', it would be relatively easy for the press to extinguish their critique through ridicule. Agitational situations, on the other hand, risked becoming spectacles in their own right, the press easily manipulating extremist performances for their own political ends. Situations had to be created which would either infiltrate and defile the press' vetting procedures. COUM's promotional stickers - betraying a clear debt to Jamie Reid's 1973 *Miner's Strike* 'subvertisement' sticker actions⁵⁷ - perfectly encapsulated the nature of this problem: *This Sticker Exploits COUM*, *COUM Guarantee Disappointment*, and *Assume this Phone is Tapped*.

Tutti believed that the answer lay in creating covert actions which were not only sophisticated enough to fool the press, but capable of confusing artworld, and non-artworld

viewer must suspend the lower responses of the appetites in order to achieve a purely aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of the work. Given that COUM were appealing 'directly' to the appetites through sexual and violence, their work was "not art." This was a point on which both COUM and Burden were in agreement, but evaluated differently.

⁵⁵ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, "Couming Along", p24.

⁵⁶ P-ORRIDGE/COUM TRANSMISSIONS, "Genesis P-Orridge", Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, (13th April) 1979, p27.

audiences:

Infiltration of mass media and systems is vital. It means subliminal performance reaches an arbitrary, unchosen, unsafe public.⁵⁸ [...] Cosey Fanni Tutti models for pin up and porno magazines, in order to get magazines containing her image. The public buy them, see her, do not know her, do not have to know it's her performance art.⁵⁹

Tutti's modelling work formed an action entitled *Prostitution* (1973-76), which was given its first controversial public airing at the ICA.⁶⁰ "Significantly, the media concentrated on the male half of the team to which she belongs because women still tend to be invisible..."⁶¹ Despite this, as P-Orridge pointed out at the time, the action was perhaps one of the most provocative and astute analyses of the artworld to date:

[If pornography] were framed and mounted in rows in one of our minimal galleries, with a fashionable artist's name given as its creator, would this make it acceptable to you? Is the photographer then an artist? If the artist chooses to be the model is it then art?⁶²

P-Orridge has simultaneously presented *Prostitution* as a acerbic assault on the complacency of the 'institutionalised avant-garde':

I have been very naive. But the show served its purpose. It was a parody of all that is wrong with the artworld.⁶³ The ICA show was a typical sarcastic rejoinder, a fake final exhibition. In the installation we had porn mags like *Whitehouse* all museum-framed and dated. All of them had Cosey in them as a stripper and a model... [...] We called the show 'Prostitution' for obvious reasons, because art is prostitution.⁶⁴

COUM of course, were no strangers to sarcasm, their slogans being *COUM: The Greatest Human Catastrophe Since Adam Got a Hard-On* and *Don't Take it Too Art* (27th March 1976). However, P-Orridge's belief that *Prostitution* re-opened a plethora of notoriously complex problems concerning value judgements and the role of viewer, and his attempts to inscribe the exhibition off as purely a stage-managed, satirical assault on the artworld, are, in

⁵⁷ See Chapter 14 Decline of the English Avant-Garde.

⁵⁸ P-ORRIDGE & CHRISTOPHERSON, "Annihilating Reality", p46.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p48.

⁶⁰ See *Sexy Confessions of a Shop Assistant*, Tabor Publications, London, 1976.

⁶¹ CONRAD ATKINSON "Art for Whom: Notes", in CORK ed. *Art for Whom*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1978, p38.

⁶² P-ORRIDGE & PETER, "Annihilating Reality", p45.

⁶³ P-ORRIDGE quoted in CHRIS HOUSE, "Orridge Report for Law Chief: Yard Act over that Sex Show", *Evening News*, London, October 22nd 1976.

⁶⁴ P-ORRIDGE quoted in JON SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, Faber & Faber 1991, p251.

fact, compatible. The success of Tutti's action hinged on the gamble that censorship of pornography, whether conservative or feminist, would be seen by the liberal artworld establishment simply as a product of the middle classes' desire to guard high culture and regulate non-culture for fear that distinction between the two might be too close to call. Faced with the stifling populist anti-avant-garde atmosphere of 1976, the ICA took the bait and presented Cosey's pornography as art. For the ICA, this did not constitute the attack on populism that the press held it to be, on the contrary, the ICA were eliminating 'elitist' boundaries between high and low, good and bad taste. On the Left, the ICA exhibition was celebrated as a political attack, problematising the middle class' life-world by merging it with its opposite. Such was the official 'institutionalised' avant-garde interpretation, as predictably outlined by ACGB Arts Panelists Conrad Atkinson and his wife Margaret Harrison in their attempts to defend the exhibition against the furore in the reactionary tabloid press:

Cosey introduced to the ICA, a space which was reserved for the showing of 'art', the reality of her won struggle for economic survival, her own sexuality as object, her necessity to pose for pornographic pictures [to supplement her performances]. Half a mile away from the ICA. such scenes can be seen in any strip-club, and in most newsagents similar photographs are openly displayed for sale.⁶⁵

By bringing these photographs into the artworld, they exposed the double standards existing in the media and society in general. An activity which debases women as sexual objects is fine when bound up in marketing and making money, but shocking in the artworld, a reflection of the attitude that art should be above and separate from the preoccupations of society. The very papers which feigned puritanical shock showed near-naked women posing on the bonnets of motor cars at the opening of the Motor Show.⁶⁶

A major oversight of this institutional position was that it failed to recognise the manner in which Tutti's action remained dependent upon the institutions of the artworld in order to achieve its effect. Having entered the ICA, the subversiveness of Tutti's action became questionable, forcing us to consider the problem that her action only functioned critically when viewed *as* an artwork. It is no surprise that *Prostitution* was immediately co-opted by art criticism and shortly afterwards by performance art history, for it is only within such situational modalities that Tutti's agency could be recognised. In an important sense, then, the kudos of Tutti's action was sustained by the value systems of the bourgeois artworld, the very class which it was thought to critique. Only by relating this observation to the climate in which Tutti's action was displayed do we begin to recognise its true resonance.



Figure 13.7 ICA Promotional Leaflet for *Prostitution* (Oct. 1976)

⁶⁵ ATKINSON "Art for Whom: Notes", p38.

⁶⁶ MARGARET HARRISON "Notes on Feminist Art in Britain 1970-77", *Studio International*, March 1977, p218.

The *Prostitution* exhibition directly followed the ICA New Gallery's display of Mary Kelly's iconoclastic *Post-Partum Document*, a work which had been constructed over approximately the same period as Tutti's. Kelly's involvement with the women's movement during the 1970s informed her work as an artist, causing her to make a distinctively feminist contribution to aesthetics. *Post-Partum Document* was a collection of objects, images and texts which mapped her own experience of motherhood in relation to her son as he progressed through his early development, from the beginnings of self-consciousness and speech to the age of seven. The work transformed the genre painting of mother and child (and above and beyond this pairing, the Madonna-and-child) by exploring the experience from the mother's perspective. While Kelly did not consider that there could a be feminist art, only art informed by different feminisms, her text/installation articulated her experience *very specifically* through the use of psychoanalytic theory based on the work of Freud and contemporary developments in the writings of, among others, Maud Mannoni, Michele Montray, Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva and Jaques Lacan, building the prison house of language, the "remarkably self-sufficient and smooth-running mechanism" within which it has been discussed to the present day.⁶⁷



Figure 13.8 Poster for *Prostitution* (Oct. 1976)

It is enlightening to consider Tutti's liberal proto-'bad girl' action in light of Kelly's particular theoretical reservations concerning the use of the body as a medium:

...there's a category of art which foregrounds what you might call feminine 'experience'. Most European performance artists are involved in that. Usually the artist uses herself as signifier, as object, and of course necessarily as a fetish. *The danger is that woman-as-sign is ultimately so recuperable, particularly with theatrical lighting, the mirrors, the video, and what have you.* Right. The artist needs some very powerful means of distancing. This usually takes the form of the text, or of the word as an intervention.⁶⁸

For Kelly, the need to establish critical distance was paramount, hence the use of pseudo-structuralisms (mystificatory 'texts') such as psychoanalysis. Equally, in 1976, Tutti saw that only conventional art institutions could provide the kind of hierarchical critical context she desired in order to manipulate the meanings of prostitution/pornography, art and anti-art. Four years later, this is a point which Tim Clark was at pains to make when discussing *Olympia*:

⁶⁷ CATHERINE LUPTON, "Circuit-breaking Desires: Critiquing the Work of Mary Kelly", *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, Verso, London, 1994, p230. Lupton's excellent critique is one of the few concerted efforts to break the mystificatory fetishisation of Kelly's work within the feminist milieu.

⁶⁸ MARY KELLY, in TERENCE MALOON, "Mary Kelly interviewed by Terence Maloon", *Artscribe*, No. 13, August 1978, p18.

...it seems to me that ambiguity is only functional in the text when a certain hierarchy of meanings is established and agreed on, between text and reader - whether it is a hierarchy of exoteric and esoteric, or common-sense and 'contrary', or narrative discourse and non-narrative connotation, or whatever. [...] To put it another way, there has to be, stabilised within the text, some primary or partially systematic signified, in order that the play of the signifier - the refusal of the signifier to adhere completely to that one set of signifieds - be construed as any kind of threat.⁶⁹

Unlike Kelly's work, Tutti's action functioned as a threat by using institutions to toy detachedly with the hierarchies that had been established amongst the late-avant-garde and in more conventional artworld circles. Although Tutti was clearly using herself as signifier, as object and fetish, she did so in a manner which was, ultimately, un-recuperable. This is implicit in the differences between Kelly and Tutti's response to the populist assault on their work. Following the exhibition of Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA New Gallery, the press responded automatically: "After the Tate Gallery's famous bricks, the new art is - dirty nappies".⁷⁰ Kelly's response was equally reflexive, as she sought to defend her work on its own terms, (against the field of the artworld and her brand of feminist theory):

I know that it makes people hostile, but I want this to be taken seriously. I am not doing this as a joke. I am doing it because I have been influenced by the women's movement, because I am an artist and a mother.⁷¹

Despite the objective resolve of deconstructive feminists such as Kelly, they were no less mythic than the logo/phallogocentric aesthetics they displaced. Interpreted as supporting deconstructive feminist arguments, Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* has since become axiomatic in the dialectics of postmodernist theory. From Kelly's reaction to the press, it is not entirely ironic that the piece should have become an historical artefact of iconic significance. For the esoteric audience, the objects images and texts which constitute THE DOCUMENT emanate a sacred aura. It functions as a numinous symbol of the belief system it helped to establish. The transgressive syllogism of the deconstructive masterpiece would become the transformative symbol of the new mythology. In deconstructing the existing myths, *Post-Partum Document* restructured the art myth.

Tutti's work lacked Kelly's intentionality. Its effect, however, was infinitely more radical, opening onto the discourses of art, feminisms, *and* their populist critique. By encouraging radical members of the artworld to read her action as art, Tutti allowed them the critical approbation of participating in an attack on both the populist press and the artworld's middle class hypocritical values. Having adopted this liberal view, however, the

⁶⁹ TIMOTHY. J. CLARK, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865", *Screen*, Spring 1980, p31-32.

⁷⁰ R. MORRIS, "After the Tate Gallery's famous bricks, the new art is - dirty nappies", *Daily Mail*, 15th October 1976.

⁷¹ KELLY quoted in ROGER BRAY, "After the Tate bricks - on show at ICA ...dirty nappies!", *Evening Standard*, London, 14th October 1976.

institutionalised avant-garde were forced to suppress its reactionary aspect as outlined by feminist iconoclast Andrea Dworkin:

Leftist sensibility promotes and protects pornography because pornography is freedom. [...] Freedom is the mass marketing of woman as whore. Free sexuality for the woman is being denied an individual nature, denied any sexual sensibility other than that which serves the male. Capitalism is not wicked or cruel when the commodity is the whore; profit is not wicked or cruel when the alienated worker is a female piece of meat... [...] The new pornography is a vast graveyard where the Left has gone to die. The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too.⁷²

Equally, we cannot have the action as artwork, and the action as critique of bourgeois values; for if we take such a 'liberal position', (viewing pornography as an artwork), we risk eradicating Tutti's agency by turning her into commodity, paradoxically denying the action's critical existence as an (anti)-artwork. If, on the other hand, we seek sanctuary by opting for the 'middle class position' (denying art status to the action), as viewers we effectively become responsible for creating pornography.⁷³ If we compare Cosey's play with the 'frame' with John Hillard's reframed, semio-photography of 1974, we quickly realise that Cosey's practice demanded more complex reaction than might be gained by mere "post-mortem analysis."⁷⁴ Indeed, here was the problem of "differentiation encountered in a subversive refusal of established codes and simple ineffectiveness, ineptitude or incompetence" which Art & Language strove for against Semio-Art's intractability.⁷⁵ As an action which cannot convincingly be viewed as art, anti-art, or non-art (pornography), *Prostitution* remains COUM's most successful, and disconcerting assault on the reality principle.

The *Prostitution* debacle saw COUM attempt to assert their agency, tightening up their act in an almost evolutionistic fashion. For their retrospective at the ICA, Tutti's research in pornographic modelling, striptease, and music⁷⁶ was utilised in a COUM collaboration as the 'industrial' pop group Throbbing Gristle (TG), re-entering the music world "much tighter, much more influenced by what we do in the art performances."⁷⁷ Token Abba fan Chris

⁷² ANDREA DWORKIN, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, The Women's Press, 1981, p208-09.

⁷³ This destabilises Jacqueline Morreau's account of feminist art in Britain: Without a sympathetic context for women's art and vocal spokeswomen, English artists dared not risk direct depictions of such subjects as female sexuality for fear they would be mistaken for traditional pornography." JACQUELINE MORREAU and CATHERINE ELWES, "Lighting a Candle", in SARAH KENT and MORREAU, *Women's Images of Men*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Society, London, 1985, p23. For a discussion of Morreau's ideas see Chapter 11 Reconsidering Theory.

⁷⁴ CORK, "From Sculpture to Photography: John Hillard and the Issue of Self-Awareness in Medium Use", *Studio International*, (Photography Issue), May/June 1975, p66.

⁷⁵ ART & LANGUAGE, "Correspondence", *Style*, Vancouver, March 1982, p11-12.

⁷⁶ For a history of Tutti's work see the booklet accompanying: COSEY FANNI TUTTI, *Time To Tell*, Conspiracy International CTI93 004 [UK], 1993.

⁷⁷ P-ORRIDGE quoted in NAYLOR, "Couming Along", p25.

Carter, (a former TV sound engineer and light show designer for YES), became TG's electronic sound engineer, building his own synthesisers, guitars, pedal effects, cut-up tape samples, and cornet, to present a very varied, but mostly noisy, sound picture. Most of the songs were made directly, unrehearsed on stage and were rarely remixed, as Tutti - in addition to playing guitar and providing the occasional vocal counterpoint to the cold electronics - did violent and sexually confrontational stage performances. Sleazy took control of the group's graphics. The sarcasm of COUM's sticker series and the ascerbic wit of P-Orridge's *Paranoia Club* business cards ("E know you really hate getting our information" "E know you don't write back because you hate us") was merged in a hardened manner for infamous posters such as *Music From the Death Factory*, *Gainsborough's Blue Movie Boy*, and *Gary Gilmore Memorial Society*.

Figure 13.9 Peter Sleazy Christopherson, *Gary Gilmore Memorial Society*, Postcard (1977).

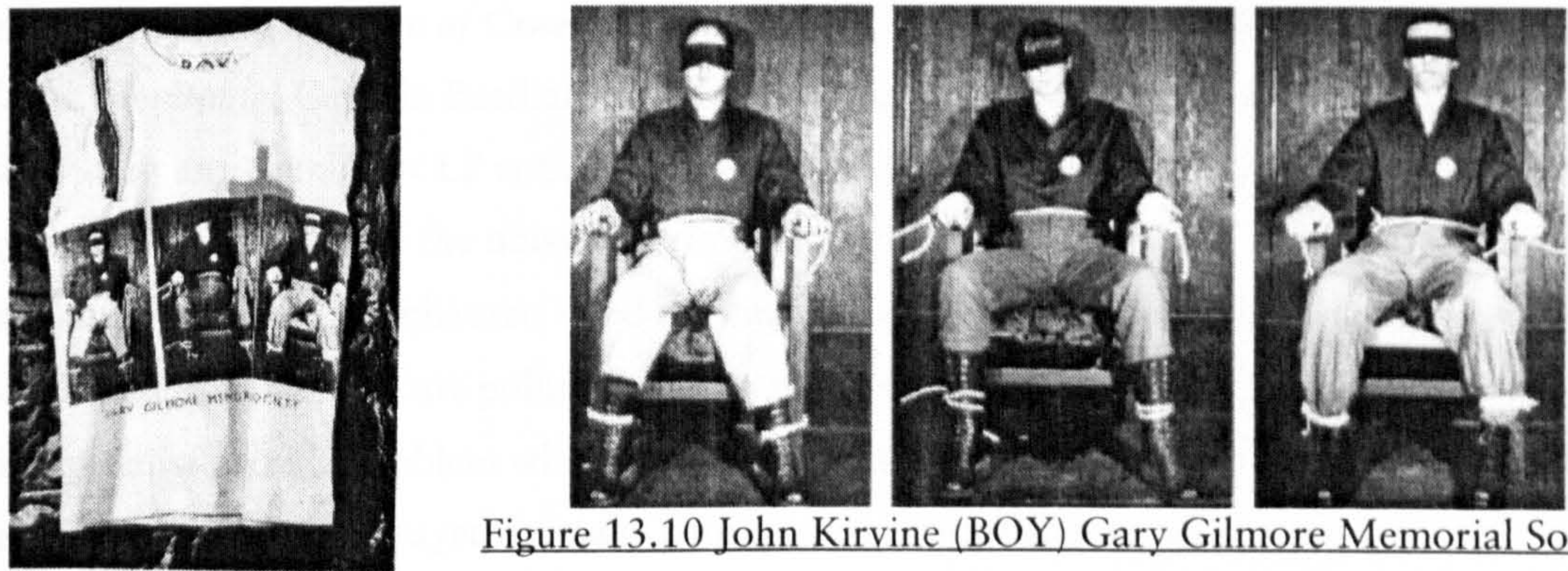


Figure 13.10 John Kirvine (BOY) Gary Gilmore Memorial Society T-Shirt (1978).

TG instantly found backing from John Kirvine, the owner of the clothing company BOY, which was in direct competition with Vivienne Westwood's *Seditionaries* boutique, making them the alternative punk product to Malcolm McLaren's Sex Pistols. During their visit to Monte Cazazza, P-Orridge and Tutti found the Gary Gilmore furore at its height. A postcard of the *Gary Gilmore* design was sent out immediately after Gilmore's execution to the warden of the Utah penitentiary and several newspapers - featuring P-Orridge, Tutti and Cazazza blindfolded and strapped into electric chairs as though they were in front of a firing squad, complete with a real loaded gun pointed at their hearts to get better reactions. They easily made the news on the 14th March 1977 ("Sickly Porridge"). The design was quickly transformed into a chic ragged-sleeved tee shirt by Kirvine, compete with punky zip, and became a hot favourite at BOY. Like the Sex Pistols, TG attacked the music-world orthodoxy of the late 1970s with exaggerated punk amateurism: "None of us can play, even now we can't even play *Three Blind Mice*."⁷⁸ TG went further than most punk bands. Instead of simply learning three chords and forming a group, they abandoned the whole idea of acquiring *any* technical capabilities, producing a series of atonal 7-inch singles. TG also reflected punk's deliberately provocative stance, a violently revisionist reaction against what young musicians

⁷⁸ P-ORRIDGE in FURLONG , "Four Interviews: Genesis P-Orridge", p15.

and fans saw as a monolithic, overtly sophisticated, irrelevant rock music establishment: “We tend to assume that people will come in at whatever level they can cope, whether its insults, curiosity, titillation or analysis.”⁷⁹ However, while Punk positioned itself in direct opposition to “higher education and technical expertise”⁸⁰, TG were attempting to operate an elaborate “crossover”, “to apply the analysis of the artworld to a popular cultural archetype and not frighten off the kids, so without them realising, we were in a way educating them or presenting to them concepts which they would normally just poo-poo and ignore because of the way they are usually packaged.”⁸¹ [...] If we said it was art they wouldn’t come along and listen. Because we say it’s just music and not even necessarily music - it’s just sound - they don’t feel threatened or alienated or that it’s contrived or elitist...”⁸²

Rather than see themselves as a pop group, TG described themselves as an ‘art-group, dedicated to non-allied political mischief’. TG’s ‘art’ lineage lay in their similarities with Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*⁸³, The Velvet Underground-Andy Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, Captain Beefhart, and Art & Language who, in the Spring of 1976, had released an anti-Semio-art LP entitled *Corrected Slogans*.⁸⁴ In addition, TG wedded punk’s aggressive amateurism to the noisy experimentation of modernist music - such as that of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen - and the angry tonality of free-form jazz.⁸⁵ In all of this, TG were attempting to dislocate politically motivated conceptualist ideas and processes from conceptualist form, a problem which continued to elide neo-conceptualists such as Burgin and Kelly. Although TG betrayed formally conceptualist sympathies in their music’s formal similarity with electro ‘Krautrockers’ such as CAN and Kraftwerk, in essence, this was a means

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ CAROLINE COON, “Rock Revolution”, *Melody Maker*, 28th July 1976, reprinted in 1988: *The Punk Rock Revolution*.

⁸¹ P-ORRIDGE in FURLONG, “Four Interviews: Genesis P-Orridge”, p16.

⁸² P-ORRIDGE quoted in MORGAN, “What the Papers Say”, p16.

⁸³ “Antonin Artaud was engaged in a life long search for truer and more pure forms of creative expression. He was a poet, director, actor, writer, visual artist and challenger of all forms of conventional and static expression. Through his life and art he sought to shock his readers and audience out of the complacency of their everyday lives and enable them to experience themselves with more truth, depth and intensity. He believed in the possibility of access to more spiritual states of being which had the capacity to renew and change through violent confrontation. After his Theatre of Cruelty experiments of the 1930s and a series of journeys in search of revolutionary culture, Artaud was incarcerated in a series of French asylums for a period of eight years. There, he suffered starvation and the threat of deportation to the wartime concentration camps. He was also subjected to a series of fifty electroshock treatments by the asylum doctors. He was finally released in 1946, and returned to Paris to undertake some of his most vital and inspirational work, including his extraordinary drawings and radio recordings. He was a visionary artist who sought to break down preconceived categories in order to create a more radical perspective that would facilitate a total regeneration of society.” ICA Homepage <http://illumin.co.uk/ica/Bulletin/artaud/artaudinfo.html>

⁸⁴ Lyrics by Baldwin and Pilkington, music by Mayo Thompson who in 1978 reformed his band The Red Crayola and began working as a producer for Rough Trade.

⁸⁵ Long songs are decidedly un-punkish. Punk songs were brief in duration since they were conceived in a spirit of reaction against the overdrawn pretensions of progressive ‘stadium’ rock.

to an end. For TG, popular music primarily allowed them to consider rhetoric and ‘marketing’ in order to increase their competition with the malignant “control processes”⁸⁶ of the mass-media, de-conditioning people who’d come to accept televised, glamorised violence and horror as the reality, restoring a true perspective, and putting the pain back into suffering. Like Conrad Atkinson and many of the social artists of the late 1970s, COUM wanted to find a way of dealing with powerful intangibles in such a way that the aesthetics didn’t blunt or interfere with the ‘basic reality’. They were, however, in complete disagreement as to what constituted “the right form of oppositional culture”, believing that it was not only possible, but necessary to “appropriate the methods of capitalism to expose its faults.”⁸⁷:

The work is that it receives a mention in a general newspaper. Art magazines never hear. People can enjoy performance without being aware of it. COUM model for LP cover,⁸⁸ it becomes a scandal in America, is resting in living rooms and flats, no one knows it was them.⁸⁹

This essentially *ante-art* stance forced recognition that mystic residues would always exist in artworks, contradicting COUM’s declaration: “De-mystification is our duty.”⁹⁰ Indeed, like many dada inspired groups, TG actively assisted in their own mythologisation. Artistic espionage and conspiracy encouraged speculation about the group’s ‘real’ activities, while their tendency to undertake one-off gigs at only a few days or hours notice created an aura of mystery. This was not clearly a case of hypocrisy, but an admission that such matters could not be worked out as easily as Atkinson might have envisaged. Performing as TG, COUM utilised hypocrisy to enrage audiences in order to encourage them to engage with contradiction.

Appearing as TG at the ICA on the 18th October 1976 during the *Prostitution* exhibition, P-Orridge attempted to set the material appropriately with a description of urban decay before leading into the lengthy *Very Friendly*, where P-Orridge spoke-sung an account of the last murder and subsequent apprehension of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the Moors Murderers.⁹¹ In this, COUM continued to push sado-masochistic performance to its limits:

⁸⁶ P-ORRIDGE/COUM TRANSMISSIONS, “Genesis P-Orridge”, Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, p27.

⁸⁷ ATKINSON, “Industry and Industrial Disease”, in CAROLINE TISDALL & SANDY NAIRNE eds. *Conrad Atkinson: Picturing the System*, Pluto Press / ICA, 25th Nov-23rd Dec. 1981, p14.

⁸⁸ Throbbing Gristle’s record sleeves, on first inspection seemed bland, a banal photograph of an everyday location, but to the initiated the spot was the scene of a crime, usually a rape or grisly murder.

⁸⁹ P-ORRIDGE & CHRISTOPHERSON, “Annihilating Reality”, p48.

⁹⁰ P-ORRIDGE/COUM TRANSMISSIONS, “Genesis P-Orridge”, Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, p27.

⁹¹ THROBBING GRISTLE, “Introduction” (1.01), “Very Friendly” (15.54), “Dead Ed” (4.32), *Throbbing Gristle Live Volume One 1976-1978*, Mute TGCD 10 [UK].

Is it only legality that prevents the artist from slaughter of human beings as performance? [...] Ian Brady and Myra Hindley photographed landscapes on the Moors in England where they had buried children after sexually assaulting and killing them. Landscapes that only have meaning when perceived through their eyes. Art is perception of the moment. Action. Conscious. Brady as a conceptual performer? [...] What separates crime from art action? Is crime just unsophisticated or 'naive' performance art? Structurally Brady's photos, Hindley's tapes, documentation.⁹²

Set against an intentionally abrasive gale of noise so harsh as to produce an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia, TG's sonorities sabotaged any glib response. Most disturbingly, on a formal level, TG had truly crossed the barrier between self-mutilation and actual physical violence, incorporating "subliminal information, metabolic frequency and different control techniques used by other organisations" into their live public performances.⁹³

You can use high frequencies to get certain effects. We've done experiments on ourselves and ended up with tunnel vision, temporary blindness, loss of balance, making this move, making patterns appear in the air, feeling hungry or sick ... Then with low frequencies you can make people loose control of their bodily functions, have heart attacks or epileptic fits or die.⁹⁴

This perfectly unified self-mutilation performance with the Rock 'n' Roll ethic of pushing beyond acceptable behaviour. Yet it was not so much COUM's suggestion that "high crime is like high art",⁹⁵ or their sonic experiments that led the artworld disown or ignore their actions,⁹⁶ as the spiral of events that took place at the opening night party:

It went brilliantly. The stripper came and stripped. I got attacked by a guy from the *Evening News*. He came up behind me and smashed me over the head with a beer glass without saying a word. [...] Then he went mad: he kicked somebody else in the balls, and then attacked three policemen outside with a brick. He got let off with a fine and then wrote this long vehement slag which triggered all the media off.⁹⁷

⁹² P-ORRIDGE and CHRISTOPHERSON, "Annihilating Reality", p44. This view was expressed earlier in NUTTALL, "Sick", *Bomb Culture*, p126-131. "Both Brady and Hindley were working class libertines in a world where the working class libertine, from Sillitoe's Arthur Seton to Genet's Claire and Solange, had been eulogised by the rebel culture." p127.

⁹³ P-ORRIDGE quoted in MORGAN, "What the Papers Say", p17.

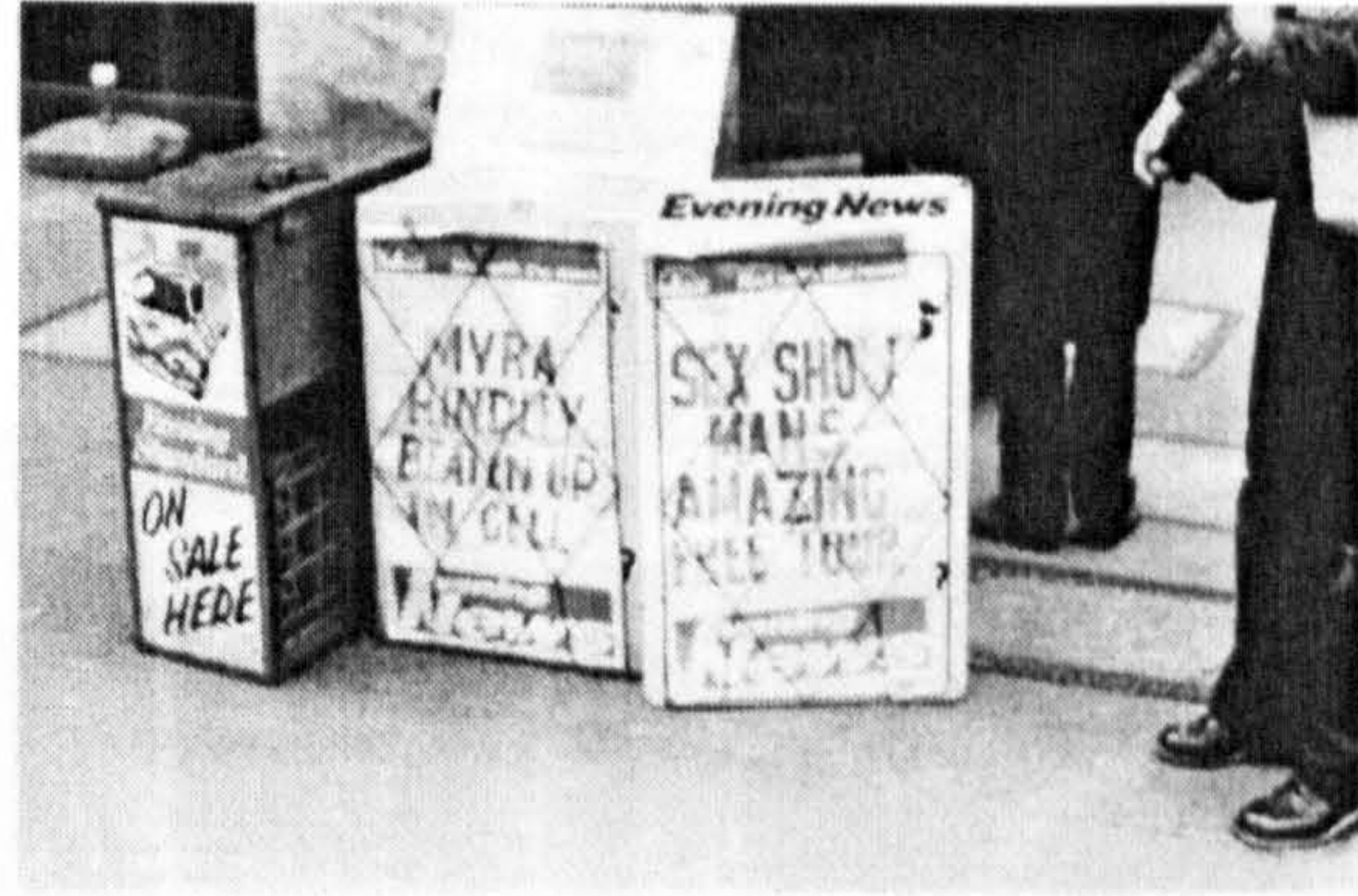
⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ P-ORRIDGE and CHRISTOPHERSON, "Annihilating Reality", p46.

⁹⁶ Despite the fact that P-Orridge and Sleazy's claim that "high crime is like high art" clearly continued COUM's critically admired and long running investigation of the links between art, sex, prostitution and crime, the popular press were furious. See: TONY ROBINSON, "Moors Murder 'Art' Storm", *Sunday Mirror*, 15th August, 1976, p9. As a result of press malpractice and misinterpretation, P-Orridge received a number of death threats. To satirically expose the hypocrisy of this situation, these death threats later appeared on *Dead on Arrival: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle*, the cover of which alluded to child pornography.

⁹⁷ P-ORRIDGE quoted in SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming*, p251.

Figure 13.11 London News Stand in October 1976



The scandal of the opening night signalled a possible direction, a way in which performance artists could “use existing situations to actually affect society from the inside, to subliminally infiltrate popular culture aware of their perception as art but realising their redundancy.”⁹⁸ Following in the wake of 1976’s major art scandals - Andre’s

‘Tate Bricks’ and Kelly’s ‘Nappy Show’ - COUM’s ‘Sex Show’ deliberately provoked public scandal, the overwhelming press attention giving the whole affair a spectacle status at odds with the Fluxus ideology from which it allegedly evolved. As we have seen, both the public and Members of Parliament expressed their outraged views in the tabloid press, calling TG ‘sick people’, ‘wreckers of civilisation’ and worse. In heeding the public outcry, members of the artworld such as the crisis critics entirely overseen the success of COUM’s subversive strategy. COUM had, in fact, cunningly infiltrated the press, revealing their ability to distort events for sales and political capital. The press reports concentrated on the sensational aspects of the exhibition and performance, resulting in headlines such as “Sex Show Man’s Amazing Free Tour”⁹⁹ referring to the British Council’s grant of £496 to allow COUM to represent Britain in Milan. Such headlines appeared alongside equally sensational reports such as “Myra Hyndley Beaten Up in Cell”. What was missed by the crisis critics was that *Very Friendly* and *Prostitution* as a whole emphasised the need for directness, dealing with sex and (sexual) violence since these were the malignant lifeblood of the society of the spectacle. The press, as COUM were well aware, would be unable to produce an unglamourised report of their activities. This would create a situation which would not only highlight their lack of integrity, but demonstrate the ways in which power produces meaning and cultural history.¹⁰⁰

As proof of their satirical mastery of the situation, COUM actually included numerous cuttings of their own ‘bad-press’ as part of the exhibition. That this strategy had previously been adopted by Conrad Atkinson since *Work, Wages and Prices* at the ICA in 1974, gave it greater resonance. Like Atkinson, COUM were documenting the erasure of history, but they were focusing on their erasure as artists. COUM’s incorporation of bad press into their exhibition subtly undermined the serious purpose of Atkinson’s iconoclastic documentary

⁹⁸ P-ORRIDGE and CHRISTOPHERSON, “Annihilating Reality”, p47.

⁹⁹ BRIAN PARK, “Sex Show Man’s Amazing Free Tour: Taxpayer Sends P-Orridge around Europe”, *Evening News*, Wednesday, 20th October 1976.

¹⁰⁰ “I think that the distribution of information is the key to change. [...] I am very antagonistic to the whole concept of being controlled by a process that nobody wants. [...] Basically the power in this world rests with the people who have access to the most information and control of that information.” P-ORRIDGE/COUM TRANSMISSIONS, “Genesis P-Orridge”, Hayward Annual, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, p27.

style: “You can get away with anything as long as it isn’t political; you can be as controversial as you like, bring sex into it or whatever - but the last thing the artworld will accept is any kind of political statement, which seems to me to be nonsense.”¹⁰¹ By 1976 the artworld and politics were virtually inseparable, the last thing it would accept, it would seem, was sex. COUM’s use of sex was clearly an affront to Atkinson’s approach, while their eagerness to post their obituaries as artists clearly ridiculed Atkinson’s search for a kind of position of political effectiveness, for ways in which artists might deal with “powerful intangibles”.

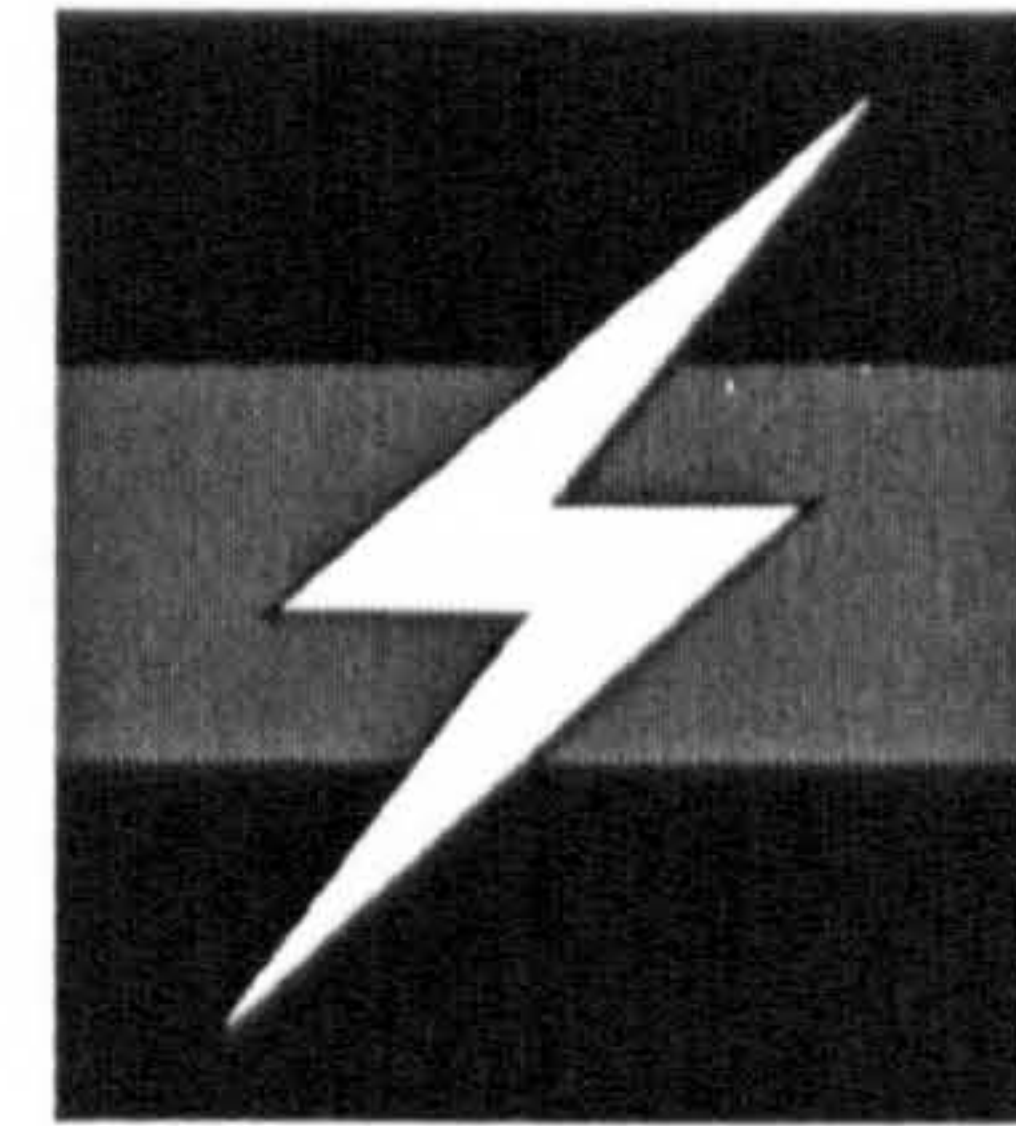
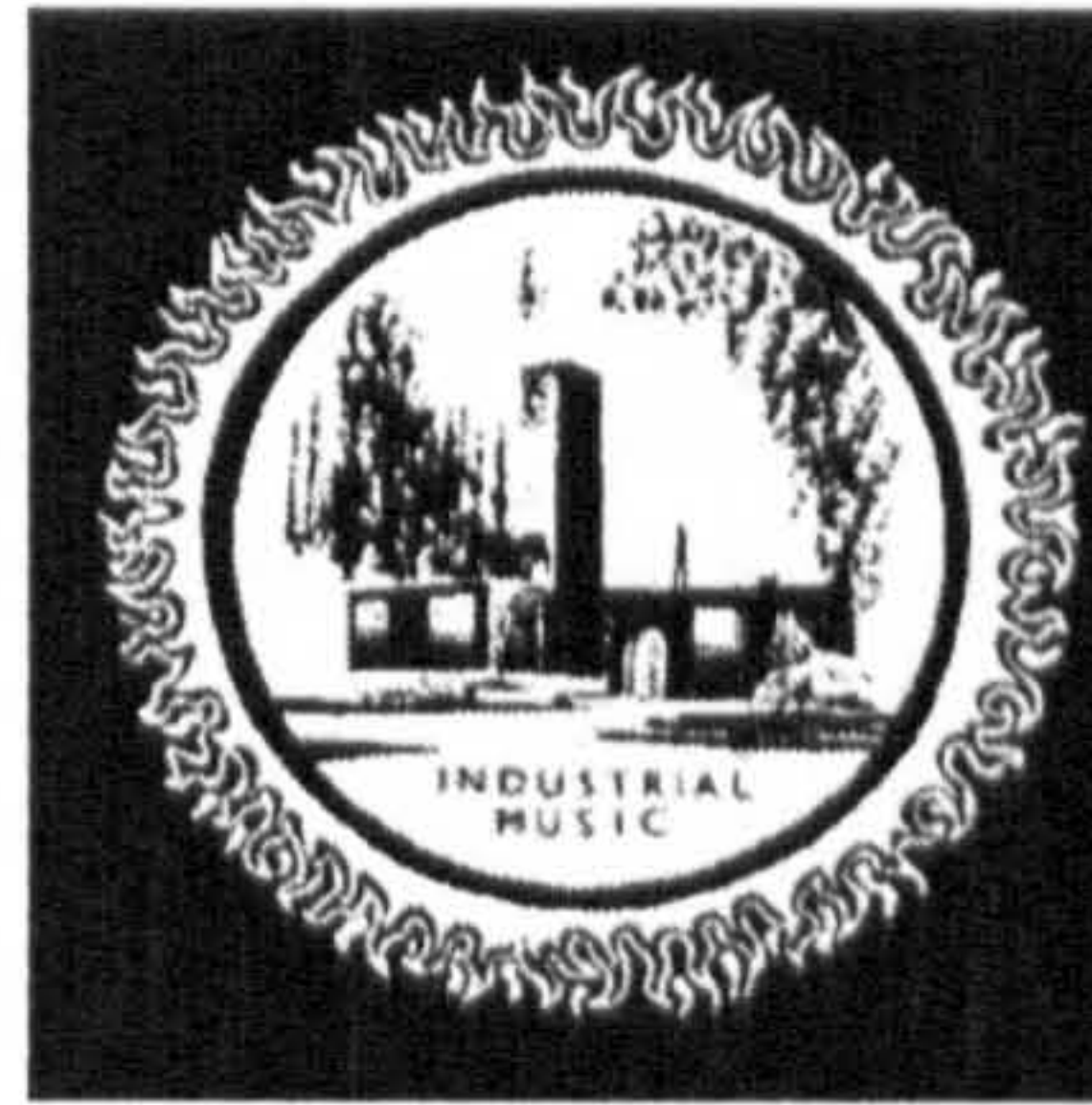


Figure 13.12 Auschwitz logo used for Industrial Records

Figure 13.13 TG’s Nazi-esque ‘Flash’ Insignia

Appearing to draw on Herbert Marcuse’s critique of collagist anti-aesthetics, Stuart Morgan identified one of the major problems arising from this approach:

Throbbing Gristle take their opponent’s propaganda and turn it against them. It is a dangerous technique. Orridge has been misunderstood, well nigh broken by the British press. [...] to suggest that the prerogative of art is simply to touch on possibilities without comment is surely shows an insufficient grasp of visual rhetoric. [...] Surely he must see that no amount of manipulation of context can redeem the use of the [Auschwitz] gas-chamber logo [for Throbbing Gristle’s Industrial Records Label¹⁰²]; in purely artistic terms, which he cannot escape, there are such things as a sense of diminished responsibility and a law of diminishing returns.¹⁰³

Indeed, as Morgan seemed to suggest, the rhetorical inconsistencies of actions and events such as the *Prostitution* affair enabled the press to sustain its attacks on the artworld, allowing them to present their political attacks as nothing more than the inane preoccupation’s of the artworld. This remained a major problem in that TG still failed to convincingly eliminate their high art credentials.¹⁰⁴ This much was confirmed when P-Orridge and Tutti appeared on TV two months after the scandal to defend their *art* work. Unlike the Sex Pistols, they did not use this as an opportunity to create another moral outrage/publicity triumph, but instead spoke calmly about the issues raised about media manipulation. P-Orridge later complained that

¹⁰¹ ATKINSON in HARRY COEN, “Making an Art of Politics”, *Newcastle Journal*, October 1974.

¹⁰² Among the artists signed to Industrial Records were: Cabaret Voltaire, Clock DVA, Richard H. Kirk, Monte Cazazza, The Leather Nun, Chris Carter, Thomas Leer and Robert Rental, and William S Burroughs.

¹⁰³ STUART MORGAN, “What the Papers Say”, *Artscribe* 18, July 1979, p18-19. Morgan’s Marcusean views had been challenged by Vivienne Westwood’s punk fashions, especially in relation to the much debated use of the Swastika. See DICK HEBDIGE, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen, London, 1979.

¹⁰⁴ This is implicit in P-Orridge and Christopherson’s *qualitative* comparisons between “high crime” and “high art”.

COUM “were being attacked as a symbol of all the artists in fact, because we were an easier target. the actual feeling was very much anti-art, it wasn’t really anti-COUM and it was just like Carl Andre’s bricks or Mary Kelly’s exhibition, it was an excuse to have a good bash and even artists whose work was more traditional have probably suffered because there wasn’t more solidarity at the time.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Tutti remarked that

The lack of united commitment to protecting an artist’s right to exist in what ever area of expression he/she chose by the vast majority of other artists, allowed a regression to empty repetition of old safe movements and techniques, a new conservatism. So now, because the artist of today is often afraid to create and say what he/she feels, we are subjected constantly to work that is dishonest, heartless and therefore completely worthless. No huge political manoeuvre was ever intended by our work.¹⁰⁶

However, there is a sense in which COUM’s dreams of ‘artistic freedom’ were responsible for this lack of solidarity, the space between their work and the ideology of which it formed a critique being too close to call. As sheriffs of the last bastion of aesthetic purity, COUM saw no possibility of constructive action. The only way they could reclaim power from the forces that ‘destroyed’ them was by embodying those destructive forces themselves. Desperate at the impossibility of building anything, they tore down, and through their destruction, they became what they railed against. Yet there lies a more dangerous problematic within the aesthetics of subversion and ineffectiveness. The militant refusal to signify might motivate non-converted consumers of the avant-garde to vent their anger by striking at the economic and ideological systems which sustain ‘high art’. More commonly, legitimisation crises encourage viewers to seek old reassurances, to attack the liberal institutions which succour the avant-garde. COUM, in effect, helped to justify and popularise the right-wing attack on the Arts Council which took place throughout 1976, and may have been a contributing factor in creating the legitimisation crises that ensured a Conservative election victory in 1979.¹⁰⁷ COUM’s antics also partially backfired inasmuch as they inhibited the artworld as a space in which to produce counter-ideology.¹⁰⁸ Concurrently, the crisis critics’ last-ditch efforts to reinvest the artworld with political agency were doomed to failure since the artworld had been effectively discredited as a political force by the right-wing press. The irony was that the crisis critics had unwittingly been party to this. In order to avoid a similar mistake, the avant-garde had to give the *impression* that they had entirely vacated the artworld and its sham ‘values’.

¹⁰⁵ P-ORRIDGE in FURLONG, “Four Interviews: Genesis P-Orridge”, p14.

¹⁰⁶ COSEY FANNI TUTTI, “Artists Thoughts on the 70s in Words and Pictures”, *Studio International*, Vol195, No911/2, 1981, p17.

¹⁰⁷ See JURGEN HABERMAS, *Legitimation Crisis*, Heinemann, London, 1976.

¹⁰⁸ “Alternative art spaces were constituted in the post-market relations of developed capitalist cultures. They were the creations of institutions like the British Arts Council, with their indirect government funding.” JOHN TAGG, “Practising Theories: an Interview with Joanne Lukitsh”, *Afterimage*, vol. 15, no.6, January 1988, p6-10, reprinted in *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field*, Macmillan, London, 1992, p91.

CHAPTER 14

Decline of the English Avant-Garde

...every invention becomes a convention: it is imitated for purely commercial reasons, which is why we must begin a vigorous anti-stylistic action in the course of eternally 'other' art. [...] A new - and final - link today completes this chain; we Nuclear painters, denounce, in order to destroy, the final convention, STYLE.¹

We assault your Gods... We sing of your death. DESTROY THE MUSEUMS... our struggle cannot be hung on the walls. Let the past fall under the blows of revolt.²

Artists engaged in political struggle act in two key areas: the use of their art for direct social change; and actions to change the structures of the art world. It needs to be understood that this activity is necessarily of a reformist, rather than revolutionary, character. Indeed this political activity often serves to consolidate the existing order, in the West, and in the East. The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state. Art in the service of revolution is unsatisfactory and mistrusted because of the numerous links of art with the state and capitalism. Despite these problems, artists will go on using art to change society.³

Specifically designed to counteract the problems encountered by COUM, had been the active nihilism adopted by Notting Hill anarchists King Mob, a counter-cultural group who took their name from Christopher Hibbert's 1958 book on the Great Liberty Riots of June 1780.⁴ King Mob's numerous graffiti campaigns around Notting Hill Gate in the late 1960s were inspired by Hibbert who named his historical study after graffiti that appeared on Newgate prison during the Gordon Riots.⁵ King Mob simultaneously made reference to Parisian Situationist graffiti slogans such as 'BE REASONABLE, DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE' and 'NEVER WORK'.⁶ Economic struggles were dismissed as simplistic mirrors of the logic of the system, as King Mob sought to appeal to the class of non-workers in an attempt to cultivate a post-industrial, post-productivist future:

¹NUCLEARISTS, *Against Style*, 1957.

²BLACK MASK, *Black Mask*, No.1, New York, November 1966 reprinted in ANON. *Black Mask & Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: The Incomplete Works of Ron Hahne, Ben Morea and The Black Mask Group*, Unpopular Books & Sabotage Editions, London, 1993, p7.

³GUSTAV METZGER, "Art Strike 1977-1980", 1974.

⁴CHRISTOPHER HIBBERT, *King Mob*, Reader's Union, 1959.

⁵On storming Newgate Prison in June 1780, the rioters wrote on the wall 'His Majesty King Mob'.

⁶Malcolm McLaren later used a very similar line in polemic for Bow-Wow-Wow's 7in single, W.O.R.K. (*No my Daddy Won't*).

SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY - TUBE - WORK -DINNER -
 WORK - TUBE - ARMCHAIR - T.V. - SLEEP - TUBE - WORK.
 HOW MUCH MORE CAN YOU TAKE? ONE IN TEN GO
 MAD - ONE IN FIVE CRACKS UP! / THE ROAD OF EXCESS
 LEADS TO THE PALACE OF WILLESDEN / I DON'T
 BELIEVE IN NOTHING - I FEEL LIKE I OUGHT TO BURN
 DOWN THE WORLD - JUST LET IT BURN DOWN BABY.⁷



Associated with King Mob at this stage were erstwhile Situationist International⁸ members Christopher Gray, Cambridge art history graduate Timothy J. Clark, the translator of Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* Donald Nicholson-Smith, and drug smuggler/underground press baron Charles Radcliffe. As members of the *Heatwave* group, they were expelled from the SI in 1967⁹ for refusing to denounce the hooligan politics of the New York based Black Mask group.¹⁰ In addition to

⁷ Graffiti under the Urban Westway Motorway between Ladbroke Grove and Paddington, London, future site of the Royal Oak Murals.

⁸ The Situationist International was founded in Italy during July 1957 by a small circle of mainly French artists and poets who previously been involved with the International Lettrists (a left-wing splinter group of the Lettrists), the Society for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the COBRA movement. Broadly speaking, Situationists believed that Western culture was played out since the technological era had opened up large amounts of leisure time, and that a revolution was needed to transform the conditions of daily existence. Situationist theory was a neo-Marxist critique of consumer capitalism that had its own theoretical jargon. Guy Debord's manifesto condemned the *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the passive experience of the consumer economy. Accordingly it was important to create 'situations' in which subjects would be made aware of the repressive structure of urban life; it was thought that they would then become responsible for their own actions and freed from drudgery: from going to work, for example, and toiling at a machine all day. Life would be creative and spontaneous, it would be art itself.

⁹ "...its policy of aiming for constant agreement on key matters, and fighting against the reproduction of hierarchy and ideological freezing within the group, led to repeated exclusions... We parted company with the Situationists in 1967 on just these questions, as applied to the S.I.'s actions in Britain and the U.S. We are not likely, therefore, to think the Situationists always got these things right." T.J. CLARK and DONALD NICHOLSON-SMITH, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International (Footnote 4)", *October*, No. 79, Winter 1997, p26.

¹⁰ "Black Mask's brand of political neo-dada was sufficient to influence the specto-Situationists in Paris for the Debordists to consider franchising them as the American section of their organisation. But after a considerable amount of manipulation on the part of Tony Verlaan, the Debordists broke with Benn Morea, who was a central figure in both Black Mask and the Motherfuckers. This, in turn, led to the expulsion of the English section of the Situationist International for remaining in contact with Morea. From their early days as the British end of *Rebel Worker*, and then as *Heatwave*, the English section was far closer to the activism of the Black Mask group than to the acerbic intellectualism of their French controllers. After their expulsion, the Brits transformed themselves into King Mob with the help of Dave and Stuart Wise who'd moved to London after growing up in Leeds and attending art school in Newcastle." STEWART HOME, *Cranked Up Really High: Punk Rock and Genre Theory*, CodeX, July 1995, p25. "Another factor may have been Chris Gray's boasts of a Notting Hill urban guerrilla army, which according to Fred Vermorel in *Sex Pistols: The Inside Story* prompts a visit from Debord himself. So the story goes, when Debord turns up at Gray's place in Cambridge Gardens, the best Gray can come up with is to send him round to new recruit Dave Wise on All Saints. There Debord is none to impressed to find Gray's guerrilla army, the brothers Dave and Stuart Wise, swigging McEwans Export and watching *Match of the Day*. Debord subsequently storms back to Paris and expels the Brit sits. Then Gray and the Wise brothers form King Mob, which Vermorel reckons does in fact number up to 60 loosely affiliated members at its height." TOM VAGUE, "Leaving the 20th Century", *Anarchy in the UK: The Angry Brigade*, AK Press 1997, p130

being joined by dipsomaniac Newcastle Art School graduates Dave and Stuart Wise, the ex-Heatwave members gained the attention of Croydon Art College students Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid when, in April 1968, they began publication of the short-lived *King Mob Echo*, [Figure 14.1 *King Mob Echo*, No.1, (1968).] a short news-sheet which included translations of Guy Debord's Situationist writings, and poetic slogans derived from Marxist and Hegelian theory. Initially, the *Echo* provided an opportunity for Nicholson-Smith, Gray and Clark to continue to 'develop and practise cultural theory by translating Situationist material.

Clark's theories concerning the avant-garde's 'refusal to signify', his engagement with the material conditions of art production, and his notion that artworks exist as situations or as a 'field of signification' can all be located in King Mob's efforts to unify art and life. Many of the group member's theoretical assumptions can be located in Norman O'Brown's article on Hegelian dialectics, "The Return of the Repressed" printed in the paper's first edition. "Dialectics is the revolt against rationalism the discovery that self-contradiction is the essence of reality the opening to the absurd."¹¹ The first issue of *Echo* also carried a 'free' translation from Parisian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem's *Traite de Savoir-vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations* (1967) entitled "Desolation Row".¹²

The Wise Brothers later explained the influence of such aspects of SI theory on King Mob's practice:

The most deranged manifestations of hate against the present organisation of society were greeted with fascination. Jack the Ripper, John Christie, ... and child killer Mary Bell. Look at the monstrosities produced by bourgeois society - isn't that sufficient to condemn the golden afternoon of hippie ideology?¹³

King Mob also drew on Debord's Situationist theory of constructing 'situations', in so much as they sought to produce acts of disruption that would imaginatively break with the logic of capital. This demanded that the politically sanctioned separation between artistic and political activity be negated. The consensual Labourite Left, which had consolidated its activities around professionalised party politics and trade unionism, was accused of failing to realise that

¹¹ NORMAN O'BROWN, "The Return of the Repressed" (1967), *King Mob Echo*, No. 1, April 1968, Pygmalion Press, London, p3.

¹² "The passive nihilist compromises with his own lucidity about the collapse of all values. Bandwagon after bandwagon works out its own version of the credo *quia absurdum est*: you don't like it but you do it anyway; you get used to it and you even like it in the end. Passive nihilism is an overture to conformism. [...] Between the two poles stretches a no-mans-land, the wasteland of the solitary killer, of the criminal described so aptly by Bettina as the crime of the state. Jack the Ripper is essentially inaccessible. The mechanisms of hierarchical power cannot touch him; he cannot be touched by the revolutionary will. Revolution is madness [...] there is a point where Marat and Sade are one." O'BROWN, "The Return of the Repressed" p2.

¹³ DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, Calderwood 15, pamphlet, Glasgow, c.1978 reprinted as "The End of Music: The Revolution of Everyday Alienation", in STEWART HOME ed., *What is Situationism?: A Reader*, AK Press, Edinburgh, 1996, p67.

‘total’ resistance to capitalist instrumentalisation necessitated a tenacious element of subjectivity.¹⁴ This theoretical preoccupation of the SI, would appear to have legitimised King Mob’s desire to practice their imaginative brand of hooligan politics, initiating happenings and proposing somewhat romantic acts of vandalism and anti-art. “The active nihilist does not intend simply to watch things fall apart. He intends to speed up the process. Sabotage is a natural response to the chaos ruling the world. *Active nihilism is pre-Revolutionary; passive nihilism is counter-revolutionary.*”¹⁵

Ideas were mooted in ‘68, which were sufficiently tasteless to horrify the prevailing hippie ideology and its older, more conservative forms - romantic English pantheism. For instance, the dynamiting of a waterfall in the English lake district was suggested, with a message sprayed on a rock: ‘Peace in Vietnam’ - not because there was a deep going interest in the war like there was in the United States but because the comment was an absurdist response to ruralism and the revolution had to be aggressively urban.¹⁶

For King Mob, as for the SI, the real ‘art’ of its age had to be one that was never finished. Since rules change in accordance with the needs of time and situational modalities, cultural politics had to become a game played according to undetermined rules: “My utopia is an environment that works so well that we can run wild in it. Anarchy in an environment that works. The environment works, does all the work, a fully automatic environment all public utilities or communication networks. Technological rationality can be put to sleep so that something else can awaken the human mind, something like the god Dionysus something which cannot be programmed.”¹⁷

The extent to which the SI influenced King Mob, nonetheless, has become a matter of much debate. On the one hand, it is clear that King Mob were playfully plagiarising their ideas for their own ends. Reading Situationism as a “philosophical update on Pop Art”, Gray intended to form the *Christopher Gray Band*, an atavistic proto-punk band that only

¹⁴“(we ask the indulgence of those, and there are many, who reject the term ‘Left’ as irrevocably compromised). This is a Left whose struggles with the late-capitalist State are at present local and multiform (‘identity’ and ‘ecological’ politics being merely the forms that the spectacle chooses for now to (mis)represent - and many others will surely be given the same cynical treatment in years to come); a Left, however, that increasingly senses the enormity of its enemy and begins to think the problem of contesting that enemy in terms not borrowed from Marxism-Leninism or its official Opposition; a Left whose insubordination is the theme of endless jeremiads from the ‘actually existing’ Left, whose dismal battle cry - to unite and fight under the same old phony-communitarian banners - it persists in ignoring.” CLARK and NICHOLSON-SMITH, “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International (Footnote 4)”, p16.

¹⁵ VANEIGEM, “Desolation Row”, p7.

¹⁶DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, p67.

¹⁷ O’BROWN, “The Return of the Repressed”, p3.

materialised as far as some graffiti 'subvertisements' on Victoria Coach Station.¹⁸ Nine years later, not only had McLaren realised Grey's idea for an anti-hippie, bad taste pop group, 'freely' swindling a passage from the first issue of *Echo* to promote their cause: "Their active Extremism is all they care about because that what WHAT COUNTS to jump right out of the 20th Century as fast as you possibly can in order to create an environment that you can truthfully run wild in."¹⁹ This might appear to negate claims that the Situationist influence on King Mob and McLaren's brand of punk was *completely* negligible. Nevertheless, Stewart Home has claimed that

since King Mob were clearly an underground phenomena, cast in the same mould as the Motherfuckers, any influence on King Mob exerted in Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid can hardly be considered 'Situationist'. The Debordists made this state of affairs quite clear in *Internationale Situationiste* 12, where they stated: 'a rag called KING MOB... passes, quite wrongly, for being slightly 'pro-situationist'. The SI was self-consciously avant-garde, whereas the wilder aspects of the sixties counter-culture that fed into PUNK bubbled up from a less sectarian, and simultaneously less intellectually rigorous, underground.

Indeed, upon further investigation, Home's claim against the SI influence would appear to be fairly accurate. Notwithstanding his eagerness to plagiarise SI slogans, McLaren was so unimpressed by Debord's incessant Stalinist bickering with other associates of the SI that he entirely dismissed the point of its iconoclastic programme: "The text [of Situationist magazines] was in French: you tried to read it but it was so difficult. Just when you were getting bored, there were always these wonderful pictures and they broke the whole thing up. They were what I bought them for: not the theory."²⁰ In 1968, while studying at Croydon Art College, McLaren had begun to film a history of Oxford Street, fascinated by Hibbert's description of how this thoroughfare that had been redesigned after the Gordon Riots so as to inhibit crowds from gaining access to the city. For McLaren, this provided a British context for a post-Situationist critique of consumer culture, the manner in which "power lay in a web of invisible controls over the masses".²¹ Loosely adapting the International Lettriste concept of 'psychogeography', McLaren filmed interviews with a Wimpy Bar designer and various employees of Selfridges. This in turn provided an impetus for two of King Mob's most famous actions: the campaign to smash the windows of Oxford Street's Wimpy restaurants, and the *Selfridges Affair*, when they took over the toy department of Selfridges in order to hand out free presents to children, one member dressing as Santa Claus for the occasion. Despite here

¹⁸JON SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, Faber & Faber 1991, p32.

¹⁹ OLIVER TWIST, *Sex Pistols Manifesto*, Christmas Day, 1977.

²⁰ MALCOLM McLAREN quoted in SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming*, p30.

²¹ PAUL TAYLOR, "The Impresario of Do-it-yourself", *Impresario: Malcom McLaren and the British New Wave*, The MIT Press, London, 1988, p30.

yielding lip service to the Lettriste/Debordist practice of psychogeography, King Mob were predominately paying homage to the Motherfucker's *Mill in at Macy's* which had previously taken place in New York, as they revealed in the following issue of their paper.²²

Being largely theatrical in its politics, it wasn't entirely clear where such activity was leading. While operating on the fringes of King Mob, McLaren became greatly inspired by the May 1968 student riots in Paris [3rd May Sorbonne students started a riot and took over the Latin Quarter] and the Hornsey Art School [28th May - 8th July North London] Action.²³ On the 5th of June 1968, three days before the end of the famous Hornsey action, McLaren, Jamie Reid and Robin Scott initiated a sit-in at Croydon Art School. However, as was the case in Hornsey and Paris, the revolt broke up as the students left for their summer holiday.²⁴ Three types of reaction can be detected in the wake of the failure of '68. Intellectuals such as Clark joined with their Parisian peers Lyotard, Baudrillard etc. fleeing into the class of economically reliable and politically chaste academia (the 'socially reformed' Leeds University) that the students of the late 60s had revolted against. Countercultural theory consequently came to service the enemy camps of high art and academic theory. McLaren's response was more typical of the swinging participants in the late 1960s counterculture. He became a populist impresario, selling 50s clothes from a swish boutique on Kings Road, effectively

²² "Large numbers of people either alone or in small groups, flooded the store at its peak hour. None of them looked like demonstrators, and they were free to impersonate normal shoppers, floorwalkers and staff in varying configurations. They moved goods around in a businesslike way. They soiled, broke, stole and gave them away. Half-starved dogs and cats were let loose in the food department. A hysterical buzzard flew around the china section smashing more and more hideous crockery as equally hysterical sales girls either tried to catch or escape from it. Decoys with flags and banners planted themselves in the middle of groups of straight middle-class shoppers who were promptly roughed up and hustled outside by cops and floorwalkers. Utter chaos..." KING MOB, *King Mob Echo*, No. 3, Pygmalion Press, 1969, p6.

²³ They demanded an "open system whereby all individual demands can be taken into account whether specialised or comprehensive. Subjects to be set up in response to the need of an individual or group of individuals at any moment - thus the curricula will be in a continual state of flux. Within the operational curricula of any one moment there will be total freedom of choice of options and combinations available to everyone. Complete freedom of individual or group research at any time with or without tutorial assistance." ROBERT HEWISON, "Goodbye Baby and Amen", *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75*, Methuen, London, 1986, p154. For more information see STUDENTS AND STAFF OF HORNSEY COLLEGE OF ART. *The Hornsey Affair*, Penguin Education Special, Middlesex, 1969; and TOM NAIRNE and JOM SINGH-SANDHU, "Chaos in the Art Colleges", in COCKBURN, ALEXANDER and BLACKBURN, ROBIN. (eds). *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action*, Penguin Special in Association with the New Left Review, Middlesex, 1969, p103-115.

²⁴ "The primary paradox is that the 'revolution' broke out not among the most oppressed [...] but among the most privileged; young, chiefly middle-class students. A revolution of the privileged is a political nonsense (though a counter-revolution is not). [...] Part of the rhetoric of student revolt was against a society based on mass production, yet higher education was primarily intended to train managers of a technocratic society - the 'technical intelligentsia' celebrated by T.R. Fyvel in *Intellectuals Today*, published in the crucial year of 1968." Whether they eventually became teachers, doctors, lawyers - even in a few cases professional writers or artists - students in one way or another were destined to become reproducers of the cultural values they inherited, though as transmitters of culture they were also in a position to alter its messages. This is another reason for the often symbolic nature of what occurred. Students were not alienated or oppressed workers, but they could act out the alienation and oppression that they saw in society." *ibid.* p152-153.

erasing the 60s from memory. Like King Mobber Clark, John Barker and Jim Greenfield also “began their revolutionary careers at Cambridge University, performing agitprop street theatre.”²⁵ However, when frustrated by lack of results from the carnivalesque counterculture, Barker and Greenfield formed The Angry Brigade, launching a terrorist campaign in 1967 in a bid to provoke revolution. In defiance of fashionable revolutionaries such as McLaren, they bombed *Biba* in Kensington High Street, Chelsea on Mayday 1971 for having manufactured lifestyles.

‘If you’re not busy being born you’re busy buying’. All the sales girls in the flash boutiques are made to dress the same and have the same make-up, representing the 1940s. In fashion, as in everything else, capitalism can only go backwards - they’ve nowhere to go - they’re dead. The future is ours. Life is so boring there is nothing to do except spend all our wages on the latest skirt or shirt. Brothers and Sisters, what are your real desires? Sit in the drugstore, look distant, empty, bored, drinking some tasteless coffee? Or perhaps BLOW IT UP OR BURN IT DOWN. The only thing you can do with modern slave-houses - called boutiques - IS WRECK THEM. You just can’t reform profit capitalism and inhumanity. Just kick it till it breaks. Revolution.²⁶

Looking at the historiographically stable Modernism of the Sixties and early Seventies, the apparent mannerism of today seems causally dependent upon the contradictions in ‘mainstream’ modernism. Punk-art, artistic Rocking, ‘bad painting’, right-wing enthusiasm for the 50s’ epigones create hiatuses for differentiation and identification. These are frequently vague and fugitive. There is little in the way of stability in interests and conventions to enable a clear differentiation of the *symptoms* of decadence and ruin from critical activity in respect of decadence. It is the cultural material we have to work with.²⁷

Glamour is perceived in the illusory nature of the transition from subject to object (private to public) expressed as myth. Image is allusion. I allude to my images. They reflect my illusions of that time. They have the virus.²⁸



Figure 14.2 Sex Pistols on the cover of *Investor's Review* (December 1977).

For many, The Angry Brigade's turn to violence signalled the end of the 60s

²⁵ibid. p152.

²⁶THE ANGRY BRIGADE, *Communiqué* 8, May 1st, 1971, reprinted in *The Angry Brigade*, Bratach Dubh Documents No. 1, 1978.

²⁷ART & LANGUAGE, “Correspondence”, *Style*, Vancouver, March 1982, p11-12.

²⁸DUGGIE FIELDS, “Artists’ Thoughts on the 70s in Words and Pictures”, *Studio International*, 14th August 1980, p27.

experiment. With the reactionary popular press whipping up panic, Britons soon countered the tide of political 'extremism' by narrowly electing a Conservative government in 1971. The Oil Crisis and the series of miners' strikes in 1973 just as swiftly lead to the defeat of Edward Heath's languid administration, as Wilson disingenuously espoused the most revolutionary Labour government to date as means of appeasing the miners. However, as everyone quickly discovered, international economic crisis meant that the cultural and political optimism of the affluent 60s baby boomers had to be severely curtailed. From 1972, mass youth unemployment became a new phenomenon, no amount of 'culture' could disguise the economic situation. Youths who grew up following the 1976 IMF crisis were the first generation *forced* to grow up without work, to be defined by the government as a new under-class, a permanent source of 'cheap surplus labour' perpetually excluded from society in order to squeeze down wages and inflation. Leaving the younger population with little to do, the economic crisis of late 1970s spawned a peculiar subcultural mix of 60s arty revolt and early 70s nihilism.

While their methods were controversial, and the results debatable, the legacy of King Mob, the Angry Brigade and COUM was an intriguing one:

The influence of mail art was most strongly felt in the [Punk's] choice of bizarre stage names. The iconoclastic nature of punk identities (i.e. Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, Siouxsie Sioux, Dee Generate and Captain Sensible) echo the assumed names of mail artists such as Cosey Fanni Tutti, Pat Fish and Anna Banana.²⁹

While this suggests that punks merely adopted the appearance of post-Situationists³⁰, in some ways their approach was even more uncompromising than COUM's. For example, in comparison to Throbbing Gristle, whose 'art' credentials remained conspicuous, the Sex Pistols adopted a decisively anti-art stance:

The Sex Pistols made their debut at St. Martin's School of Art on Friday 6th of

²⁹ HOME, "Punk", *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*, AK Press, Stirling, 1991, p81.

³⁰"The Sex Pistols: they just wanted to be a rock and roll band. They didn't have anything to do with Situationism. I know Jamie Reid who did all the artwork. When you see Rotten [John Lydon] talk these days he's pretty inarticulate. He's read all this pretentious rubbish about himself and he tries to reproduce it, and he sounds absurd doing it because he doesn't understand what he's talking about. The way they connected it back to the Situationists was Jamie Reid, and I asked him, and he said that he was never a member of King Mob. King Mob contained several members who were in the British part of the Situationist International. If you read the SI journal, it says that King Mob are not Situationists. All these people want to build up Situationism by saying it had a huge influence on punk. It's rubbish. The real influence on punk was the harder edge of the sixties. Punk was anti-sixties and anti-flower power, and it drew on the harder edge of the sixties like the Yippies and the Black Panthers." HOME in ALEXANDER LAURENCE, "Interview with Stewart Home", 1995, [Http://www.altx.com/interviews/stewart.home.html](http://www.altx.com/interviews/stewart.home.html) Home's thesis has been verified at times by John Lydon: "All the talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks. It's nonsense! Now that really *is* coffee-table book stuff... Everything is just some kind of vague organised chaos." JOHN LYDON, *Rotten, No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1993, p3.

November 1975. The irate social secretary cut the power after five numbers. Only ten minutes on stage and the band had created the first Them and Us rock schism in over a decade. In the following months most people who heard their music found it repulsive. They booed accordingly. The Pistols just jeered back, branded the opposition 'boring old farts', and carried on regardless.³¹

Goaded and occasionally assaulting their audiences, The Sex Pistols created a setting which blurred the line between spectators and performers, peculiarly demanding performances which could not be held at bay through cerebral detachment, a popular 'art' which rejected almost all formulas for populist entertainment.



The Sex Pistols' aura of complete unpredictability and violence greatly impressed Sleazy Christopherson who took the first promotional pictures of the band in 1975. [Figure 14.3 Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson *Sex Pistols*, Promotional photograph, (1975).] Financial backing, however, did not materialise until the autumn of 1976 when Malcolm McLaren established *Glitterbest Ltd.* in Dryden Chambers off Oxford Street to manage the band: "Malcolm McClaren decided to manage the Sex Pistols because he thought they would be a good advert for his shop [SEX]. He wanted to sell a lot of trousers!".³² McLaren was joined by Jamie Reid, who, since befriending McLaren at Croydon School of Art in April 1968, had contributed visuals for the post-Situationist publication *Suburban Press* (1970-75). The *Suburban Press* had been Reid's response to his growing disillusionment "at how jargonistic and non-committal left-wing policies had become"³³ during the early seventies:

I found Situationist texts to be full of jargon - almost victims of what they were trying to attack - and you had to be really well educated to understand them. [...] I wasn't so much attracted to the Situationist theory as to how they approached media and politics. The slogans, for instance, were so much better than the texts. They were very immediate, very direct and quite classless. They became part of the language. [...]there was also a sense of humour there, and of turning the media back on itself.³⁴

As with COUM, central to Reid's work was his recognition that power depends upon controlling information. While working for the *Suburban Press*, however, Reid made several significant attempts to break out of the mould of Situationist artiness and the left's agit-prop

³¹CAROLINE COON, "1976", 1988: *The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*, Omnibus, 1982.

³² HOME, *Cranked Up Really High*, p19.

³³JAMIE REID in SAVAGE, *Up They Rise: The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*, Faber & Faber, London, 1987, p55.

³⁴ REID in *ibid.*, p38.

in-fighting by merging both forms of practice:

We always had a fear that the posters would end up as decor for trendy lefties' bedroom walls. So we did images for specific situations. [...] We plastered Oxford Street with the *This Store Welcomes Shoplifters* stickers late one Sunday night [during the Miner's Strike of 1973], and spent the Monday watching the reactions. [Figure 14.4 Jamie Reid, *Subvertisement Stickers*, (1973).] Friends of ours went and shoplifted quite openly and then, when stopped, pointed out the stickers to the store detectives in the poshest tones possible. They got away with it.³⁵



As the Sex Pistols art director, Reid's graphics, typography and black and white photography consisting of letters and pictures cut out from newspapers, continued to ape the appropriational photomontage encouraged by *Camera work et al.* Unlike the Camera work group, however, Reid indicated distaste for politically determinate and determining work. Reid took a more politically ambivalent approach, adopting a visual vocabulary and style which was recognisable, knowable and entertaining, yet strongly reminiscent of King Mob's acid absurdity. Utilising the Situationist concept of detournment, Reid 'found' other people's graphics and adapted them to the Pistol's context with quite different results, taking pictures from a *Belgian Holidays* brochure for the scathing *Holidays in the Sun* record sleeve [Figure 14.5. (Previous Page) Jamie Reid *Holidays in the Sun* (14th October 1977)]: "The result was very successful: bright, unpunky until you looked at it carefully; and complementary to the song's global political hysteria. The Belgian tourist company, sued of course, and Jamie had to destroy the original work in front of a solicitor."³⁶



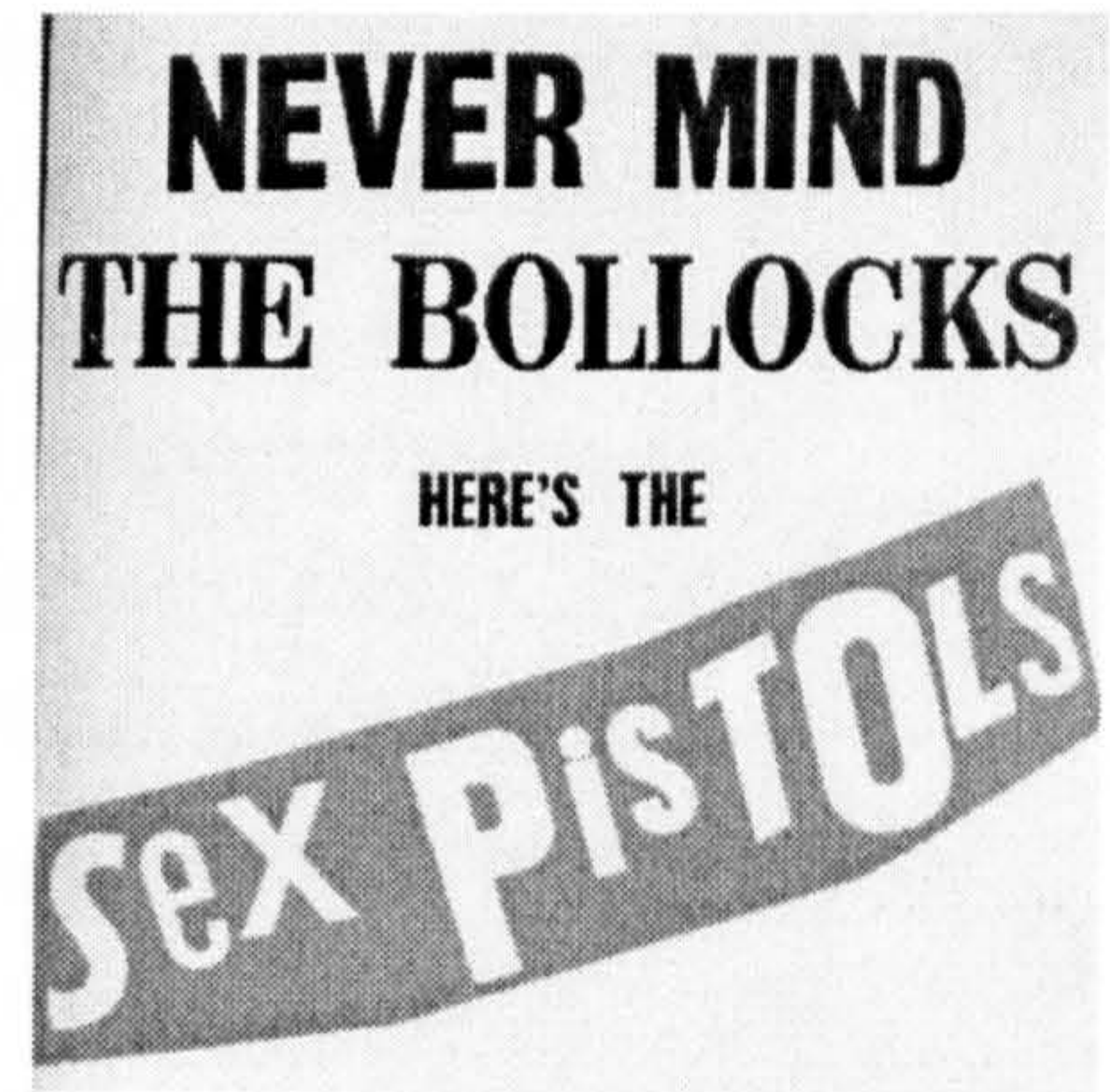
Unlike the *Camera work* group, Reid's 'rip off' graphics and Helen Wellington-Lloyd's 'ransom note' lettering³⁷ constituted a formidable political menace, directly challenging

³⁵ REID in *ibid.*, p43. Again this mirrors a stunt pulled by the Motherfuckers in New York when they printed invitations for a major ghetto store in the Lower East Side, claiming to be offering free goods. Fifty Motherfucker activists turned up at the said time, demanding goods to be handed over. See *King Mob Echo*, No. 3, 1969, an issue devoted to Black Mask, the Motherfuckers and the International Werewolf Conspiracy; and *Black Mask & Up Against the Wall Motherfucker*, 1993.

³⁶ SAVAGE, *Up They Rise*, p72.

³⁷ Helen Wellington-Lloyd: "I was told it had to be something quick and we had no money for Letraset.

bourgeois values such as 'property rights', and 'bad taste'. P-Orridge style, Reid's graphics for the *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols* album sleeve [Figure 14.6] were also subject to a heavily publicised court action. On this occasion, however, Reid and Glitterbest managed to defeat the obscenity laws in a Nottingham Court, the zenith of their defence being when James Kingsley a Professor of English Studies at Nottingham University solemnly elucidated the 1000 year history and use of the Anglo-Saxon term 'Bollocks'.³⁸



Writing in 1980, Peter York noted the significance of Reid's contribution to popular culture: "The main thing that punk introduced was the idea of cut-ups, montage - a bit of Modern Artiness - to an audience who'd never heard of eclecticism. Punk was about changing the meanings of things."³⁹ While Peter York's grinning approval confirms punk's recuperation into the spectacle; by drawing a critical and historical comparison between Reid's work, and anti-fascist montage of the late 1970s such as MINDA's designs for CARF⁴⁰, we are forced to recognise that Reid's "Modern Artiness" constituted an uncommonly radical form of political 'art'. Before MINDA began to confront the rise of Fascism by drawing allusions between the images of the Conservative Party, the National Front and the Nazis in the late 70s, Reid had carried out a sustained assault on the *iconography* of fascism which made MINDA's strategies appear almost propagandistic. From placing a swastika in place of the Queen's eyes (*God Save The Queen*) to forming a swastika from marijuana leaves (*Never Trust a Hippy*), Reid ridiculed fascism by striking at its very heart, de-centring its power by problematising the meaning of its imagery. In addition, Reid's paradoxical use of a capitalist mode of production (album sleeves, tee-shirts and stickers) to disseminate such imagery helped not only to solve the problems of the institutionalised avant-garde but of the Left *per se*: "...the fact that stickers weren't quite artwork made them more immediate and less likely to get stuck on people's walls. They were actually likely to be used as propaganda."⁴¹ Throughout his

I loved finding letters from different newspapers and making copies of little posters." Vivienne Westwood: "Helen did the first kidnap lettering for the handouts... She grabbed the feeling of what this whole punk thing was about." in CRAIG BROMBERG, *The Wicked Ways of Malcolm McLaren*, Omnibus Press, London, 1991, p103.

³⁸"Even the case was embarrassing, as the Sex Pistols had benefited from the very liberal consensus they ostensibly despised. 'Virgin had an overeducated view of it all,' says Tiberi, 'the *Bollocks* case misconstrued the whole point of it.' Winning the case was not the image this group wanted." SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, Faber & Faber 1991, p425.

³⁹PETER YORK, "The Clone Zone (Night of the Living Dead)", *Style Wars*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1980, p47.

⁴⁰(Campaign Against Racism and Fascism) See MINDA, "MINDA", in T. DENNET, D. EVANS, S. GOHL, AND J. SPENCE, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, London, September 1979, p125.

involvement with The Sex Pistols, Reid's political intent remained clear - the ability to change meanings empowers the dispossessed. While artists such as Burgin and journals such as *Camera* had advocated this, Reid initiated it, disseminating guerrilla semiotics *en masse*.

McLaren, meanwhile, adapted Situationist tactics of shock and agitation to revolt against musical expertise and the corporate machinery of pop. This allowed him to capitalise on the radical *claim* that swiping at the music business - a perfect example of consumer capitalism - would encourage the audience (the society of the spectacle) to force change. Commercially inspired by the Situationist belief that life should be creative and spontaneous, McLaren encouraged the Sex Pistols to display anti-social behaviour. Practising this policy for their appearance on *The Today Show* hosted by Bill Grundy⁴² was enough to provoke a national scandal.⁴³ Goaded by the host to "say something outrageous", the Sex Pistols replied spontaneously, "You dirty bastard", "You dirty fucker", and "What a fucking Rotter."⁴⁴ Radio stations across the country immediately banned *Anarchy in the U.K.* (1976). Local councils barred the group from town halls. Workers at EMI staged a wildcat strike and stopped shipment of the record in protest over the TV appearance. The resulting barrage of publicity saw the meteoric rise of The Sex Pistols and the end of Grundy's career. Like COUM Transmissions, McLaren quickly became a master at *creating* spectacles, releasing the Sex Pistols' single *God Save the Queen* (1977) during the Queen's Silver Jubilee. A group of MPs, including Marcus Lipton, Labour MP for Lambeth Central and Neville Trotter, Conservative member for Tynmouth forced the BBC and independent Radio Luxembourg to ban the record, the furore over the song revealing how easily free expression could be circumscribed.

By [1978 ...], a lot of revisionist stuff was going on, it was getting really difficult to grasp what exactly 1976 was all about, whether punk was an Art movement or a political one or, indeed, just a big con, put on by Malcolm McLaren...⁴⁵

While the situations created by The Sex Pistols revealed a critical obsession with systems of control similar to that of COUM Transmissions, both McLaren and Reid subsequently claimed that assaulting the pop scene head on, polarising listeners and prompting

⁴¹ REID in *Up They Rise*, p61.

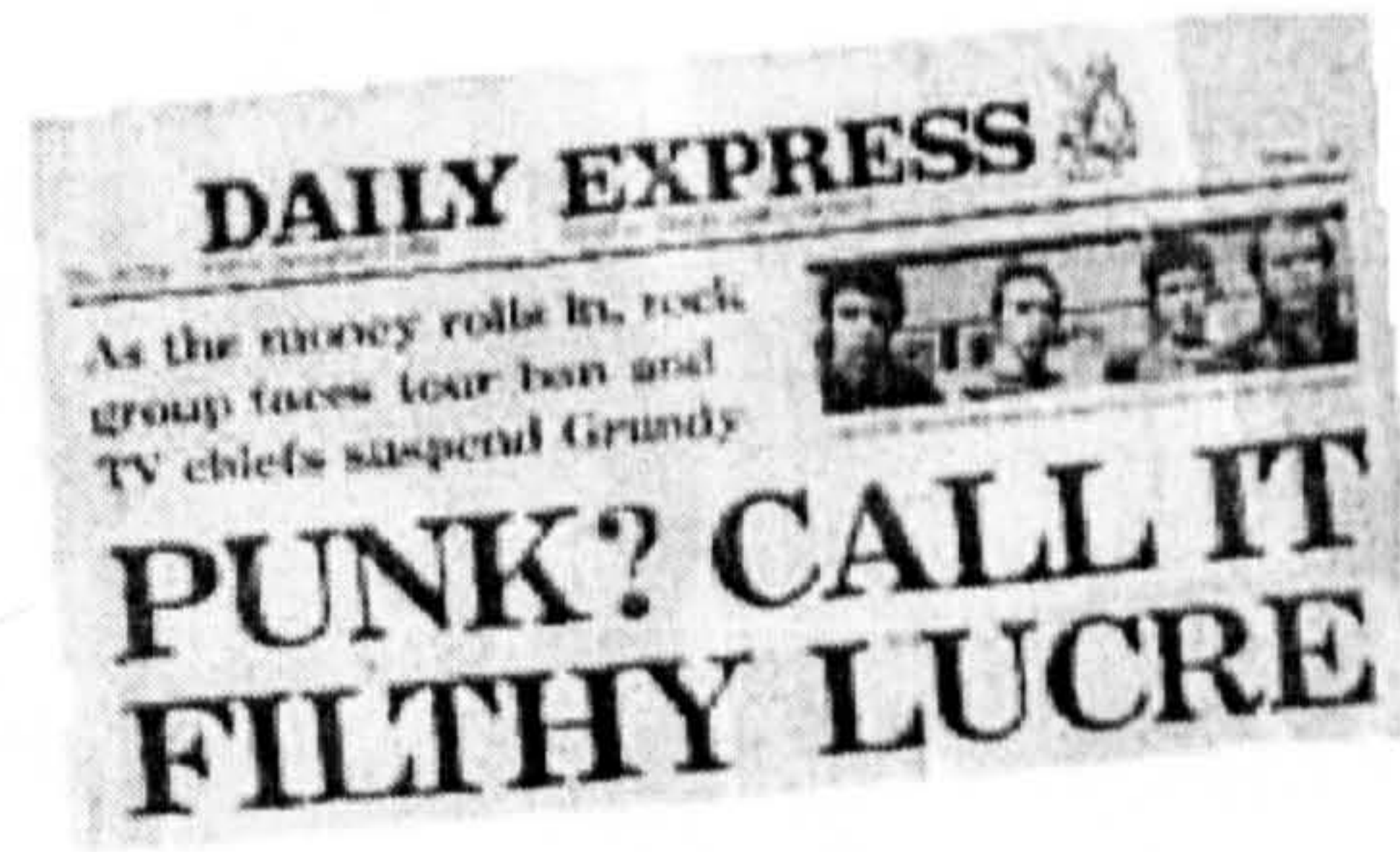
⁴² THAMES TELEVISION, *The Today Show*, 1* December 1976.

⁴³ The TV station is deluged with complaints, one irate lorry driver puts his foot through his television screen in disgust. Stewart Home explains that this incident related to 'The Frost Freak Out' on November 8th 1970 when Yippie leader Jerry Rubin was being interviewed by David Frost. Twenty Yippies stormed on the stage, their swearing provoking an inquiry by the Independent Television Authority.

⁴⁴ Quoted in MARY HARRON, "Punk is Just Another Word for Nothin' Left to Lose," *Village Voice*, 28th March, 1977, p56.

⁴⁵ YORK, "Boys Own", *Style Wars*, p36.

righteous warnings about renewed teen barbarism simply gave The Sex Pistols a lot of publicity, enabling them to get more gigs and make “Cash Out of Chaos”.⁴⁶ Punk certainly was a boon to the sharply competitive conservative British press, as they continually played up every disturbance and controversy. [Figure 14.7 *Daily Express* 2nd December 1976.]



Another avant-garde movement had been commodified and institutionalised, yet what remained disturbing was that its protagonists had been a party to their own movement's co-option.⁴⁷ Had the (anti)aesthetics of indifference been played out? Certainly, using capitalist tactics to fight capitalism resulted in a stalemate of sorts.⁴⁸ At the end of the 1970s Glitterbest punk claimed to have produced the ultimate situation, the death of Art. COUM's nihilism had simultaneously been suppression of nihilism, finding meaning despite the fact that nothing has meaning. Their anger that no morals existed concealed their desire for a new moral code (e.g. P-Orridge's vernacular language). If COUM were truly nihilistic they would have 'Cease[d] to Exist', as their stickers advocated, rather than extend their activities within TG, Psychic TV, Temple ov Psychic Youth, Chris and Cosey etc. In this, they failed to recognise that the only alternative form of 'purist' nihilism, as explored by Glitterbest punk, would be to perform out of crass materialism. Similarly, ex-King Mobbers, the Wise Brothers,

⁴⁶This suggests that McLaren was deliberately attempting to produce *situations* in the music press, in addition to more popular mass-media channels. Since 'Cash Out of Chaos' had been a Glitterbest slogan from the outset, McLaren and Reid had some reason to claim that the music press had misunderstood their intent to 'rip everyone off'. That this misunderstanding may have been deliberate is clear from the huge transformations which took place in the British music press between 1976 and 1978, as *NME*, *Sounds*, and *Melody Maker*, were drawn away from promoting pop and progressive 'art' rock by the 'social integrity' of Punk. While the political intent of mainstream punk bands such as The Clash is unquestionable, Glitterbest punk's was not. The reformed British music press were forced to include The Sex Pistols among other 'bona-fide' punk bands in order to cope with a phenomenon which threatened to destroy their sales. Having created a crisis situation in the 'art rock' press through aggressive promotion, Glitterbest in turn created a crisis situation in the reformed 'punk rock' press, questioning the value and intent of their socio-political criticism that had been hastily developed to promote the new music. For an account of the changes in the British popular music press see YORK, "Boys Own", *Style Wars*, p19-39.

⁴⁷See Reid and McLaren's "Ten Lessons", *The Great Rock n' Roll Swindle*, Polygram Video, 1980. "It is fair to say that McLaren's 'use' of his situationist 'knowledge', apart from the obvious 'borrowing' of graphic styles (detournement) and sloganeering rhetoric, centred round the theoretical implications of the Spectacle's ability to recuperated oppositional practices. He knew that the more he refused incorporation, the more they would try to recuperate him (here 'they' are the entertainment and leisure industries, 'he' stands for the punk project). In his role as the artist-businessman, McLaren used the insights and analysis of the SI to do 'good business'. GEORGE ROBERTSON, "The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture", *Block*, 14, London, 1988.

⁴⁸The Thatcherite Right, of course, had long been mimicking the populist rhetoric of the left. Unlike the New Right's populist tactics, however, it would seem that the Left's attempt to burn out the ideology of the New Right was knowingly doomed from the beginning, testifying to the Left's growing pessimism during the 1970s. McLaren and Reid's subsequent careers indicate that the fragmentation which resulted from this encouraged a *growth* in conservative attitudes, McLaren becoming a consumer/entrepreneur *par excellence*, Reid becoming a mystic 'artist' with interests in ancient Celtic culture.

missed the point of Glitterbest's extreme pursuit of nihilism:

Punk is the admission that music has got nothing left to say, but money can still be made out of total artistic bankruptcy with all its surrogate substitutes for creative self-expression in our daily lives. Punk music, like all art, is the denial of the revolutionary becoming of the proletariat.⁴⁹

Of course, being truly nihilistic, punk had to be a denial of *all values*, whether 'conservative' or 'revolutionary'! Take the money and run.

Those who sought to continue found that the use of rock to shock quickly became predictable, and hence not very shocking. In punk as in dada, *épater le bourgeois* worked only once; by the second time, cynicism set in. McLaren and Westwood quickly found punk's atavism to be far deadlier. Since refinement and style were perceived as props for social control, punk's shoddy musical luddism entailed a stubbornly static form of rock conservatism, rather than the carnivalesque prank they had envisaged. The anti-art conventions of punk became an obligatory code even more constricting than those previously rejected: "Punk's lasting contribution to rock criticism has been musical moralism. Records are judged for their intentions not their effects; credibility is the necessary virtue, hypocrisy the most damning vice."⁵⁰ Continual arguments arose in the music press about 'punk posers', bands who had adopted a punk image and sound because it had become marketable, rather than because they believed in the 'punk cause'. When the assumptions underlying punk's critical apologists are analysed, it can be demonstrated that such questions were somewhat misconstrued.

Drawing heavily on the Institute of Social Research's critique of bourgeois culture, reformed music critics had praised Punk for its emancipatory impulse while maintaining a populist distaste for 'Academic' theories of popular culture. Consequently, punk was seen to answer to the Frankfurt Hochschule's negative critique of popular music, a critique outlined in Theodor Adorno's famous essay *On Popular Music* (1941). Adorno here argued that popular music merely served to pacify the masses and insure their acquiescence to increasingly oppressive social relations. Since the repetitious rhythms of popular music were essentially the same as the rhythms that dominate the factory, Adorno claimed, enjoyment of the former facilitated an acceptance of the latter. Resistance to these ubiquitous forms of social control could only be generated through the development of the 'negative'; that is, modes of critical thinking and cultural productions which stand in contradiction to the dominant, ideologically-based forms of thought and experience - as Herbert Marcuse put it, forms which "desubliminate the affirmative nature of culture" and its "established universe of discourse."⁵¹ Such negations must stand as critiques not only of the content of bourgeois culture, but also of its

⁴⁹DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, p73.

⁵⁰SIMON FRITH, "Consuming Passion", *Melody Maker*, March 10th, 1979, p14.

form and structure. It was on these grounds that punk critics based their understanding of punk as a politically revolutionary movement.⁵² Formally punk was chaotic, irregular and harsh, while as a 'cultural production' it was highly subversive in intent (or so it seemed):

In retrospect what is amazing is that the insipidness, (within of course its own terms) of early 1970s/mid '70s rock, didn't produce an active revolt against the musical spectacle but *merely* the urge to update it. [...] Punk rock uses the desperation [...] the disenfranchised...] but only finally to reinforce this desperation. [...] As usual, the left concentrated on the content of the lyrics and not on the form of production and what makes them even more pathetic was their pitiful analysis of the sources of content with the spectacle unchanged in its essential dictatorship.⁵³

While Punk Critics were correct to praise Punk as a socio-political concept, in concentrating on its Benjaminian 'shock effect' they were overlooking the importance of its aesthetic dimension. What McLaren and Reid seemed to have recognised from the beginning was that Punk delinquent subculture, since created through the channels of the mass media, could only simulate revolution.⁵⁴ Despite their anti-art tendencies, post-Situationist counter cultures were aesthetic, since their acts of defiance were primarily symbolic they would be repressively tolerated rather than severely put down. As Marcuse had argued in *Counterrevolution and Revolution* (1972): "[Subculture] may help to tear the ideological veil but leaves intact the structures behind the veil."⁵⁵

Virgin might once of been strongly identified with the underdogs and iconoclasts of rock, but the climate had changed, and the Pistols had not been signed just in order to further the aims of the revolution. The company had paved out £45,000 for the great punk hopes, and Branson was expecting spectacular returns.⁵⁶

⁵¹HERBERT MARCUSE *An Essay on Liberation*, Beacon, Boston, 1969.

⁵²A good example of this kind of writing from the period is DAVID LAING's, "Punk Rock", *Marxism Today*, April 1978.

⁵³DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, p64-65.

⁵⁴McLaren's actions were contemporaneous with the launch of *October*, the American journal of art and theory. McLaren provides one link between the historical avant-garde and the Baudrillardian postmodernism popular in the early to mid 80s. Baudrillard's theoretical collapse of the distinction between fiction and reality, as everything enters a marketplace of consumable signs, was, in a sense, initiated practically by McLaren, finalising the recuperation of the 'avant-garde': "Since much academic discourse is grounded in notions of the authentic (and its loss), individuals engaged in cultural and media studies find the prospect of assimilating the 'radicality' attached to 'avant-garde' ideas a very attractive proposition. The book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* by Hal Foster, in which a bastardised version of spectro-Situationist theory is wielded in defence of blue-chip art may be taken as typical of this trend." HOME, "Aesthetics & Resistance: Totality Reconsidered", *Smile* No.11, London, 1989.

⁵⁵HERBERT MARCUSE, *Counterrevolution and Revolution*, Beacon, Boston, 1972, p132.

⁵⁶MARK KIDEL, "The Hip Capitalist Dream - A Profile of Richard Branson", *The New Review*,

Indeed, it is absurd to think that punks might have valued their 'subcultural' status to the extent that they imagined their existence might change the social, economic and political topography of Britain. Moreover, for punks to regard their culture as a possible solution to the problem of the artist's contribution to the perpetuation of an oppressive system, would make them guilty of the egotism and elitism they deplored. Hence, while elevating themselves to the status of tragic heroes, punks simultaneously had no delusions about their (in)action. In recognition of the limitations of subculture, punk did not arise spontaneously from the 'frustrations of the working class', it was constructed using an organised, 'hip-capitalist'⁵⁷ approach: "[The] overt recuperation of a bowdlerized situationist critique in the UK was really the capitalising of deceased active nihilism inherent in the activities of [pseudo-situationists] King Mob continuing to exist as a nostalgic, dearly beloved memory, static and unself-critical."⁵⁸ This is clear from the behaviour of the Sex Pistols and punks in general. Punks went beyond traditionally defined delinquency, their violations being not so much illegal as knowing attacks on style and form. The punk stance is a parody of delinquency, utilising mock violence, masochism, and theatrical breaks with 'straight' culture.⁵⁹

When punk brandished class credentials it studiously avoided the flat cues of the respectable white working class. With its tattered clothing, public swearing and spit, it chose the marginalised vestments of the urban damned: the lumpen proletariat. [...] Proud of its 'dumbness', punk was yet the most articulate of subcultures: anti-art in intention it adopted a politics of ruptural aesthetics; denying the prevailing sense of 'class' and 'politics', it offered the most explicit social radicalism.⁶⁰

Volume 4, Number 45, December 1977, p9.

⁵⁷Mel Ramsden of Art & Language has suggested that this approach was written into the ideology of Semio-Art: "I think our disenchantment (not that there was much, if any, enchantment) is with those who seek to identify their virtue with making all the correct cultural *moves*. There were once socialism-in-one-art-work *moves*. This happened around the time conceptual art matured into up market graphics on the one hand, and into a kind of cultural journalism on the other. We need not concern ourselves with the up market graphics: McConceptual Art. The problem with the cultural journalism is that it seemed to have no place of practice. Well, it did have one: it went straight to management. The artist was re-born upwardly mobile as a kind of executive." MEL RAMSDEN interviewed by TOM HOLERT, "Art & Language: Painting By Mouth", *Flash Art*, No.175, March/April 1994, p82.

⁵⁸DAVE AND STUART WISE, *Punk, Reggae; A Critique*, p70.

⁵⁹"...class is actually a fluid category and the rhetorical use made of this notion by various individuals associated with PUNK can most accurately be described as a form of theatre. [...] This harping on 'epater les bourgeoisie' misses the point because transvestism is as likely to shock blue collar workers as their white collar bosses. Being more firmly rooted in generational than in class differences, rock usually sets out to shock parents in general, and not simply individuals who view themselves as belonging to the middle or upper classes. [...] Of course, the idea that PUNK is underground, or at least 'oppositional', is problematic in terms of those postmodern theories that view our epoch as a time of proliferating margins. But then that part of the PUNK audience that has any interest in post-modernism is more than capable of resolving this 'contradiction' by adopting a pose of 'ironic' consumption. Besides, coherence is death, whereas living cultures are generated from the tensions generated around clusters of contradiction." HOME, *Cranked Up Really High*, p10-11, 17.

⁶⁰IAN CHAMBERS, "Urban Soundscapes 1976-: England's Dreaming", *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and*

This would seem to confirm that punk 'anarchy', in contrast to other forms of anti-social behaviour, contained a strong aesthetic component. Thus, in line with McLaren's 'pop-Situationist'⁶¹ intent, anarchy for the punks was never so much about 'pure' or class-based political protest as it was an aesthetic rebellion against controls which were not economically or politically motivated but were normative in origin.⁶² As Caroline Coon demonstrated, Johnny Rotten did not write, "protest songs, as such. He IS protest. In *Anarchy in the U.K.* he is not advocating anarchism. He IS anarchism. Its a subtle shift of emphasis."⁶³ Hence, despite its proud display of primitivism, punk retained a peculiarly nebulous 'artiness'. Since artistry *per se* was suspect, the conventions of punk didn't invite departures, McLaren had sought to guarantee that art had no future. Punk's conceit was its glory, its triumph a form of suicide - all things considered, a tough act to follow.

The pastness of art in its highest sense implies that the work of art - once endowed with an aesthetic presence - no longer stands in that religious and historical context out of which it emerged. It becomes an autonomous and absolute work of art.⁶⁴

The baroque artistic creation's long-lost unity is in some way rediscovered in the current consumption of the totality of past art. When all art is recognised and sought ... the very production of baroque art merges with all its rivals.... Once this 'collection of souvenirs' of art history becomes possible, it is also the end of the work of art.⁶⁵

Come 1977 the punk explosion was everywhere and, at first, the soul set were excited. True to form, it wasn't McLaren's socio-political shenanigans that attracted them but The Sex Pistol's youth and uniforms. Johnny Rotten wasn't an ideological iconoclast as much as a clotheshorse for his interpretation of McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's togs

Popular Culture, Macmillan, Hampshire, 1985, p181.

⁶¹See FRITH, *Art into Pop*, Methuen, London, 1987.

⁶²In all, this implies a dialectical critique of separation that can be traced back to McLaren's involvement with King Mob: "...alienation is schizophrenia [...] The reality principle is the distinction between inner world/and external reality and it is a false distinction, the false reality principle. [...] Marxist thought substitutes for the reality of individuals the reality of classes but classes, as external realities, mutually external, are not real either. It really all takes place in one body. [...] The proletariat is dead but the proletariat is us. Long live the proletariat." O'BROWN, "The Return of the Repressed", p1.

⁶³CAROLINE COON, "Interview with Johnny Rotten", *Melody Maker*, 20th July 1977. Coon refers to the following lyrics from JONES, ROTTEN, MATLOCK, & COOK *Anarchy in the U.K.* 1976:

And I wanna be Anarchy
And I wanna be Anarchy
Know what I mean?
And I wanna be Anarchist
Get pissed
Destroy...

⁶⁴JOACHIM RITTER, "Asthetik", [An historical evaluation of Georg Hegel's aesthetics] *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie*, Basle, Schwabe, 1971, p576, translated in HANS BELTING, *The End of the History of Art?*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1987, p12.

⁶⁵GUY DEBORD, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, Black and Red, London, 1970. quoted in TAYLOR, "The Impresario of Do-It-Yourself", p26.

[...] ...to claim that they [The Sex Pistols] had any political significance is stupid. If they did anything, they made a lot of people content with being nothing. They certainly didn't inspire the working classes.⁶⁶

Writing for *The Book With No Name* (1981), the first book of the New Romantics, Ian Birch precisely identified the punk legacy. Clearly cut off from its pseudo-political referents, punk culture was seen as the fabrication it was, an anti-aesthetic movement which gained its meaning only as it stood against other cultural forms. By 1978 it seemed that, from its inception, punk typified what George Melly adroitly characterised as the drift from "revolt into style." With the demise of subculture was left an aura of romantic disintegration:

It may be better to disregard the claims made for social art and read between the lines, accepting it not as a means of changing the world but as a pretext for a shifting style. True to form the new style infiltrates the elitist havens under the guise of being an anti-style, the end of 'isms' for all time.⁶⁷

The end of "isms" brought with it an end to punk nihilism. Style made a hedonistically triumphant return with dramatic consequences:

There was more Art around - Art business, Art Therapy, Art fashion, Art planning - in the seventies than ever in the history of the world. This was a development that was out of line with what Marx had said or common sense had ever observed, which was simply this: that culture became pluralist (or shot to bits) even if the 'cultural hegemony' or, broadly, the notion that the dominant style at a given time is that of the ruling class, had always been such a self-evident one that hopeful left wingers had always taken the converse to be true.⁶⁸

As Peter York hoped, visual culture after punk had to cope with a major dilemma, namely the lack of a unitary culture to counter. To a number of post-punk artists it seemed that Glitterbest's aesthetic tricks had dealt a death blow to both 'affirmative' and 'counter' culture, closing the gap between them. The political and critical hierarchies which had sustained the project of the avant-garde, it seemed, could no longer operate as an index of value for 'advanced art' since such hierarchies had been shown to contain a number of practical and theoretical contradictions.

Perhaps, then, it is reasonable to claim that punk's anti-design stance had always made the whole enterprise peculiarly *arty*. Not according to another popular myth recently rehashed, this being that punk designers were untrained, anonymous figures, their designs raw and uncouth, using anything that came to hand - biros, Xeroxes, aerosols, and scissors, their aim

⁶⁶IAN BIRCH, "In The Beginning", *The Book With No Name*, Omnibus, London, 1981, p11.

⁶⁷JAMES FAURE WALKER, "The Claims of Social Art and Other Perplexities", *Artscribe*, 12, June 1978, p19.

⁶⁸YORK, "Style Wars", *Style Wars*, p13.

being to deface the designs of happy hippies trained at art school. It is true to say that many designers remain anonymous while designated designers such as Sabastian Conran, who produced promotional material for The Clash, were self-taught. Yet many celebrated punk designers *were* trained at art school, and for them plagiarism was more of a carnivalesque prank than political art terrorism directed against Western property values. Malcolm Garrett began designing sleeves for the Buzzcocks while still a graphics student at Manchester Polytechnic, where he had developed a taste for International Style typography by reading Herbert Spencer's newly republished *The Pioneers of Modern Typography*: "I began merging a number of things I liked, the pioneering type of graphic experiments like Futurism and Bauhaus from earlier in the century with stuff from pop art and Andy Warhol."⁶⁹ In the summer of 1977, Garrett's fellow student (and future Assorted iMaGes co-designer) Linder Sterling was finishing her dissertation on the sanitation of punk. Her photomontage for the Buzzcocks *Orgasm Addict* (1977), [Figure 14.8] while having obvious precedents in dada and surrealism, most closely mirrored the kinds of anti-consumerist montage produced by mail artists and feminist community photographers in the 70s, satirising imagery from magazines such as *Woman's Own*. Certainly such punk 'designs' were formally chaotic, irregular and harsh, while as 'cultural productions' they appeared subversive in intent; all laudable credentials for any aspiring subculture, but wasn't a very similar 'anti-aesthetic' to be found in the converse Hegelian logic of grunge-formalism which had demarcated 'fine art' from 'design' in most art schools since the late 1960s? Assorted iMaGes became testament to such a view, given that they were not anarcho-syndicalists, but a duet of graphic designers who, as students, had been inspired by punk to cast aside their airbrushes and set squares in revolutionary ferment: 'This is *The Evening Standard*. This is *Fiesta*. This is a pair of scissors. Now form an advertising Consultancy.' Hence, Assorted iMaGes "will use any style; avoids fashion, ignores trends; dismisses fads; deplores dogma; remains oblivious to politics; adores American cars; eats at McDonalds; and sleeps irregularly."⁷⁰ "The idea that you can still go out and do what you want is coming back at last", claims Ben Kelly sleeve designer for Godley & Creme, A Certain Ratio, and The Cure among others. "I still count myself as one of the lucky generation", fortuitously suggesting that some 'punk' designers were luckier than others.⁷¹ If anything, the cult of the individual designer was reinforced by punk's "version of



⁶⁹MALCOLM GARRETT quoted in "Graphics", *Creative Review*, February 1998, p37.

⁷⁰ASSORTED iMaGes quoted in CATHERINE McDERMOTT, "New-Wave Graphics: A Manual of Style", *Street Style: British Design in the 80s*, Design Council, London, 1987, p71.

⁷¹BEN KELLY quoted in DOMENIC CAVENDISH, "The Great Rock & Roll Exhibition", *The Independent* (Style), 31st January - 6th February, p5.

the credo *quia absurdum est*: you don't like it but you do it anyway; you get used to it and you even like it in the end."⁷² Copyright, an issue previously of little interest to graphic designers, became *the* hot topic, (battles continue to take place over the attribution of many Pistols graphics.) Who was the best designer outlaw; who was the least individual? Generating such contradictions, of course, was the whole point.⁷³

On the other hand, not everyone revelled in the ambiguity. From 1978, it was clear that a greater number of record sleeve designs were becoming more absolute, while others looked like baroque creations fit to challenge the collection of souvenirs of art history that inspired them. In most cases, however, the carnivalesque and agitational side of punk seemed to convert to an emphasis upon record-design-as-historicist-commodity.⁷⁴ Given that many sleeve designers had quickly abandoned the anti-aesthetic, the emphasis on commodity fetishism was an ingenious means of ensuring that records did not lose their newly acquired art status. The ironic 'Industrial' style which had been initiated by TG in the lead up to 1978's *Winter of Discontent*, was reformulated and taken literally by technological determinists such as Cabaret Voltaire, Brian Eno, and designers such as Ben Kelly and Neville Brody who were largely behind the 'Motorway Aesthetic'.⁷⁵

Ultra-elegant Industrial sleeves inspired a plethora of designers to lovingly refine the utopian aspirations of ubiquitous modernist schools of design.⁷⁶ Drawing on Garrett's successful appropriation of the International Style, former school-mate and Manchester Polytechnic graduate Peter Saville turned his back on felt-tip and photomontage, and injected a melodramatic sentiment of romantic disintegration into the late 1970s by highjacking modernist design for a new generation of 'pale boys' raised on Kraftwerk and Berlin Bowie.

⁷²"The passive nihilist compromises with his own lucidity about the collapse of all values. Bandwagon after bandwagon works out its own version of the credo *quia absurdum est*: you don't like it but you do it anyway; you get used to it and you even like it in the end. Passive nihilism is an overture to conformism. [...] Between the two poles stretches a no-mans-land, the waste land of the solitary killer, of the criminal described so aptly by Bettina as the crime of the state. Jack the Ripper is essentially inaccessible. The mechanisms of hierarchical power cannot touch him; he cannot be touched by the revolutionary will." VANEIGEM, "Desolation Row", p7.

⁷³For more information see BRYAN BIGGS and CHRIS KENNEDY, *Cover Versions*, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1981; "Land of Hope and Glory", *New Musical Express*, 13th June 1981.

⁷⁴See YORK, "Culture as Commodity: Style Wars, Punk and Pagent", in J. THACKERA (ed.), *Design After Modernism*, London, 1988.

⁷⁵Brody graduated from the London College of Printing in 1980. He was largely responsible for the revolution in British graphic design caused by his typography on *The Face* from 1981 onwards. See JOHN WOZENCROFT, *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*, London, 1988.

⁷⁶This, in turn, was to influence the academic artworld: "Producing *BLOCK* was labour intensive and drew heavily on the expertise of a recent graphic design graduate [of Hornsey Art College/Middlesex Polytechnic], Kathryn Tattersall, whose choices reflect a contemporary interest in Russian Constructivist graphics". *BLOCK*, "Introduction", *The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 1996, pxi Despite this, it took some time before *BLOCK* took pop culture seriously enough to allow it to appear in its pages. See DICK HEBDIGE, "In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop", *BLOCK*, No.8, 1983, p54-68.

Saville elicited a busy abstract sublime, activated by an engaging tension between a mass-produced look and a painstakingly handworked feel to the finished products for Joy Division, New Order and The Durutti Column. [Figure 14.9 Peter Saville, *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, (18th April 1980)].⁷⁷

His work is slick and technically brilliant with an eye for near-perfect alignment of type and skilful use of historical sources, from Roman lapidary letters of the first century for Joy Division, to Jan Tschichold and the Modernist aesthetic for New Order.⁷⁸



The operative tone of Factory designs, remained hopeful and visionary, but exuded a powerful lack of meaning and place, creating a look that was neither critical nor nostalgic, but *evolutionary*. Saville resuscitated the particular brand of optimism engendered by modernist design, ensuring that his work would resist assimilation into the interior design market, rather than embrace it as would Kelly.⁷⁹

The implications of this for ‘high art’ were clarified as early as 1977 with publication of Charles Jencks’ *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. Although Jencks’ book dealt primarily with architecture, his theoretical commitments were to become increasingly important for a number of artists attempting to force a way through the punk cul-de-sac. According to Jencks, Post-Modernism was beginning to beckon architects and artists towards a rich cultural heritage rejected by modernism, placing art back within logocentric traditions which would assist, rather than discourage, iconographic and allegorical readings. Adopting an attitude of amused, agnostic pragmatism, Jencks celebrated what he regarded as the waning in the rhetoric of opposition and critique in Post-Modernism. Post-Modern architecture often functioned as an ironic critique of the heroics of past achievements, altering quotations from established landmarks and classical structures in a totally detached and self-conscious manner. That such elements were often used as building blocks, without accepting their accompanying explanatory systems, suggests that Post-Modernists had adopted some of the demythologising tactics of critical postmodernists, albeit to a lesser degree. In the 1970s, however, Jencksian Post-Modernism went largely unnoticed by such artists and critics. It remains clear, however

⁷⁷See MICK MIDDLES, *From Joy Division to New Order: The Factory Story*, Virgin Books, 1996; MARK JOHNSON, “An Ideal for Living: An History of Joy Division” Proteus Books, London, 1984; STEVE TAYLOR, “Industrial Manoeuvres in the Art”, *The Face*, May 1982, p50-55.

⁷⁸CATHERINE McDERMOTT, “New-Wave Graphics: A Manual of Style”, p73.

⁷⁹Kelly’s most celebrated commission is the ‘motorway aesthetic’ *Hacienda* night-club in Manchester, owned by Anthony Wilson of Factory and New Order. See “The Hacienda: New Steps for the leisure Industry”, *The Face*, November 1982, p50.

that Jencksian Post-Modernism was manifesting itself where Kitaj and Hockney were leading in terms of formal eclecticism and iconographic plurality, moving in much the same spirit of reaction against the overtly refined, esoteric styles of Minimalism and Conceptualism. It would, nonetheless, remain inaccurate to term Kitaj and Hockney's practice as an instance of what Frederick Jameson later termed "the cannibalisation of all styles of the past" in the process of pastiche. Moreover, punk had added a different mentality to the equation:

Laurie Ray Chamberlain denounces Hockney in very much the style of Johnny Rotten reviling Mick Jagger or The Who. Some affinities are too close for comfort.⁸⁰

On graduating from the RCA, Chamberlain had been a contestant in Andrew Logan's 1975 Alternative Miss World Competition. Following his encounter with such London society figures he became a Xerox artist,⁸¹ for whom art was the visual projection of an entire style of living and thinking. In the mid-seventies he briefly found fame for his colour photocopies of seventies icons such as David Bowie [Figure 14.10]. The implication of Chamberlain's work was that pop figures such as Bowie produced the kind of *gesamptkunstwerk* that should be considered to have replaced the avant-garde as advanced art. His



photocopies were recognitions that, as a visual artist, he simply could not compete. Although he did not stop producing artworks, early in 1977 he followed his courage of his convictions, getting a job as a gossip columnist and fashion editor for *International Times*. By the late 1970s, Chamberlain found aspects of his Xerox work had been adopted by sectors of the post-punk pop scene, most notably by Adam and the Ants, whose "slogan 'Ant Music for Sex People'" summarised their "highly entertaining evolutionary dead end for the Punk Rock sub-genre."⁸² Adam and the Ants' second single *Zerox*,⁸³ the sleeve of which was designed by Adam Ant himself, paid homage to Chamberlain. Subsequently, Chamberlain was enlisted to select stills from Clive Richardson and Stephanie Gluck's *Zerox Machine* video for the sleeve of the Ants' third single *Cartrouble*.⁸⁴

⁸⁰TERENECE MALOON, "Notes on Style in the Seventies: 1. Modes of Perceiving", *Artscribe*, 12, June 1978, p15. In fact, with the anarchic on stage guitar-smashing performances of Keith Moon, The Who were a formative influence on the Sex Pistols, who often included a version of *Substitute* in their sets.

⁸¹See PATRICK FIRPO, *Copy Art: The First Complete Guide to the Copy Machine*, Richard Marek Publishing, New York, 1978.

⁸²HOME, *Cranked Up Really High*, p71.

⁸³ADAM AND THE ANTS, *Zerox/Whip in my Valise*, Do-It Records DUN 8, June 1979.

⁸⁴ADAM AND THE ANTS, *Cartrouble/Kick!*, Do-It Records DUN 10, February 1980.

Like many of his pop peers, Ant had also heeded a number of the hip capitalist lessons of COUM, Glitterbest and punk in general [Figure 14.11 Adam Ant as an Hegelian Highwayman in 1981]. Ant (then Stuart Goddard) studied graphic design at Hornsey Art College before forming the Ants in 1977:

He wanted to create an audience not cater for one. He did not want to compete. [...] Adam is the mastermind behind all 'Antgraphics', designing badges, T-shirts, record sleeves, posters and almost everything else!! He likes: Clint Eastwood, Allen Jones, Dirk Bogarde, Dave Berry, Sex Pistols circa '76, Jim Morrison, Lenny Bruce, Jordan, Ennio Morricone, Joe Orton, Stanley Spencer, Montgomery Clift, early Roxy Music, Charles Bronson and original Sex clothing...⁸⁵



Alan Jones controversial erotic female studies, exhibited at the ICA in 1978 to great feminist protestation, and Alan Web's lecture series on *The Erotic Arts* also had a profound effect on Adam Ant's *taste* for combinations of sado-masochistic pornography and slick advertising imagery. On May 10th 1977, the Ants aped the entrees of Throbbing Gristle and the Pistols, when they debuted at the ICA, Ant wearing a leather executioners mask from Westwood's *Sex* in Kings Road for his performance of their song *Beat my Guest*.⁸⁶

I just entered into the craziness. It was scary: I used to wear rapist hoods, and just attack the audience. That was the way it was. The audiences then, there was an element of danger, but there was excitement: it was like parachuting for the first time.⁸⁷

The performance was abruptly terminated, the band being forced to complete their 'Antshow' during the interval of John Dowies Show in the ICA Theatre. On October 3rd 1979, McLaren stepped in to manage the group. Three months later, just following the release of the group's debut LP *Dirk Wears White Sox*, McLaren had persuaded three members to leave and establish his 'pirate' pop-group project, BOW WOW WOW, whose most famous production probably remains Nick Egan's cover design for *See Jungle....* (1981, RCA), a translation of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*. Such breakneck theoretical pop culture, *demanding* a vigilant, elite group of knowledgeable post-situationist consumers, clearly presented an attractive challenge to the tiresome, time-consuming methodological games being played by the

⁸⁵ANON. *Adam and the Ants Catalogue*, CBS 84549, 1980. Included with *Kings of the Wild Frontier* LP, CBS 84549, 1980.

⁸⁶ "Tie me up and hit me with a stick / Beat me, beat me / Use a truncheon or a household brick / Beat me, beat me / Black and blue, baby I love you... Hit me please make me bleed... There's so much happiness behind my tears / Beat me, beat me / I pray you beat me for ten thousand years / Beat me, beat me..." *Beat my Guest* was eventually released as the B-Side of the single *Stand and Deliver*, CBS 1981.

⁸⁷ADAM ANT in SAVAGE, *England's Dreaming*, p376.

bourgeois academic British art world establishment.⁸⁸ This challenge, it would seem, could never be satisfactorily impugned given the difficulty of differentiating between an academic art world and a pop scene that both needed equally high levels of 'innovative' theoretical kudos to sustain market interest in their cultural products.

Image is allusion, the only constant is change. Glamour is perceived in the illusory nature of the transition of the subject to the object (private to public) expressed as myth. Personality is the inherently surprising manifestation of direction under will. The necessity for motivation within an infinity of chance/choice creates constant conceptual crisis. Shifting perspectives, viewpoints are all relative, limbo is around the corner.⁸⁹

This much is demonstrated by one of the earliest manifestations of Jencksian 'post-punk *art*' in Britain, the adolescent historicist neo-kitsch of Duggie Fields. As a student at Chelsea School of Art during the mid-1960s, Fields had experimented with Minimalism, Conceptualism, Constructivism, before developing "a more hard-edge post-Pop figuration".⁹⁰

I had a very strong conceptual phase when I did algebraic equations that I made visual imagery from and it completely dictated the image. Then I got more organic. Then I went through a very minimal period again with just triangles and squares. I stuck a figure of Donald Duck into one of the 5ft canvases made from squares and triangles of bright colour. I got shouted at. The whole art department got brought to see this painting in horror and I thought I had obviously found a direction.⁹¹

Although the direction that Fields had chanced upon was highly synthetic, it initially owed a great deal to the 1960s Pop-Art interest in pin-up magazines and comics. *Miro, Miro on the Wall* (1973), for example, paid homage to Richard Hamilton's punning use of mass media sources as a means of subverting the canon of art history. In 1975 Field's decided to merge 60s style with what he seen to be the '70s Style', the Body-Art preoccupation with fetishism and self-abuse, severing the heads and limbs of his figures.⁹²

Fields' first use of this device came in 1977 with *Against the Inertia of the Seemingly Static Whole Each New Harmonic Incorporation of Life Seemingly Impinges as a Dynamic Perversity*, a painting titled after a quotation from the architect Buckminster Fuller. This

⁸⁸See CHAPTER 8: Radical Academicism.

⁸⁹ FIELDS, "Seeing is Believing", IKON Gallery, 1978.

⁹⁰MARY ROSE BEAUMONT, "Biographical Note", *Duggie Fields: Paintings 1982-87*, Albermarle Gallery, London, 28th October - 20 November 1987.

⁹¹ FIELDS, interviewed by MIKE VON JOEL, "Duggie Fields: Dynamic Perversity and Other Such Stories", *Art Line International - Art News*, Vol. 3. No.10, 1988, p11.

⁹²"In fact, he admits candidly, part of the reasons for the truncations is simply that once, when painting a figure, he had difficulty with the face. 'The body was fine, but I just couldn't get the head to work, so I

painting achieved Fields some degree of fame when, along with *Conversation Piece*, it became available as a David Shepherd-style poster published by Motif editions in the early 1980s.

The central figure comes from an advertisement in a fashion magazine of the late 1950s. [...] Then, with the memory of the missing limbs of the Victory of Samothrace, [...] he painted this figure with a flying skirt. Behind her (missing) head was originally a plain black square, perhaps a nod in the direction of Ad Reinhardt. Whilst the picture was still a sketch Fields saw in New York an exhibition of Lucio Fontana which he found powerful and unexpectedly moving, and as a result he decided to slash the black square.⁹³

...*Dynamic Perversity* not only mocked the allegedly radical cutting actions of punk and 1970s performance art, but of avant-garde as a whole. Unsettled patterned relationships between pictorial elements were deliberately overstated, and sources absurdly eclectic: making the pointed suggestion that style and content were both subservient to the vagaries of fashion.⁹⁴ Pubic hair was positioned on the outside of the clothing in order to allow Fields to “reduce to the figure to a straight line and still keep the quality of organic form.” This device also permitted Fields to signal the figure’s loss of identity, substituting darkness for light as she becomes a stylistic icon, disappearing into the undistinguished surface of self-image signified by her glamorous clothing. Fields also allowed the flat ground to cut into her body, severing her head and leg. The frigid manner in which the paint is applied inflates the meaning of this cautious cutting action. There is a distinct absence of the thin washes, daubed expressionistic fervour, of the twisted, smeared and flayed flesh favoured by many British figurative painters. Fields, rather, chose to carefully *build*, his paintings, suggesting that to be reduced to nothing is an end, that it represents a kind of stability, whilst establishing an ironic clash with the latent violence in the treatment of the figure:

Fields believes that when his figures are mutilated, perhaps even because of the amputations, appearing comfortable with their incapacitates, they represent the dominance of mind over matter, the spirit transcending the flesh, obliging the viewer to empathise with the metaphor for the human condition.⁹⁵

Indeed, by virtue of its conceitedly harmonious and elegant structure, ...*Dynamic Perversity* dismays in its denial of ‘imaginative’ life-force, alerting us to the consequences of this denial for culture and our own sense of self.

cut it off”. ELIZABETH TOPPIN, “Home is Where the Art Is”, *Residence*, No. 17, October 1988, p37.

⁹³ BEAUMONT, *Duggie Fields Paintings 1982-87*, p2.

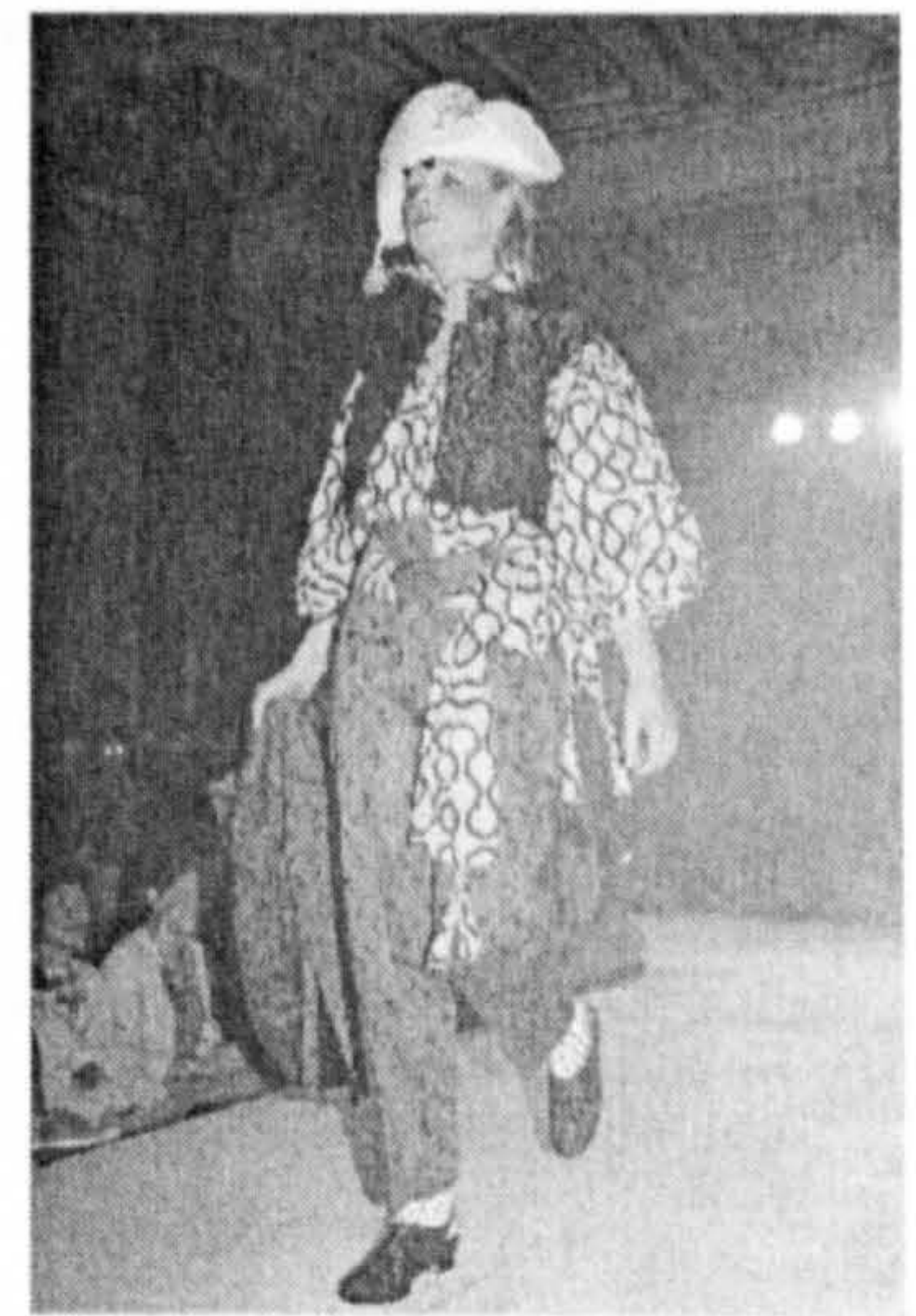
⁹⁴ That this view was held by some critics even during COUM’s *Prostitution* exhibition see TONY PARSONS, “But Mutilation is So Pass/e”, *NME*, 30th October 1976.

⁹⁵ BEAUMONT, *Duggie Fields Paintings 1982-87*, p2.

In 1978, Faure Walker obliquely suggested that Fields had surpassed the experiments of Kitaj and Hockney. Fields' work, Walker believed, lacked what he regarded to be an unnecessarily stifling concern with social communication, dealing rather with the "question of how to correlate style and function when both are in an indeterminate context, of how to make art without being preoccupied with the appearance of making art."⁹⁶ In comparison with COUM and Glitterbest, Fields was less interested in comprehensively shaping his work's reception environment through revolutionary gestures, although maintaining an expanded field remained a priority. Like Glitterbest, Fields had planned to conquer the fashion industry, producing hand painted shoes and cut up, breastless dresses in order to explore the possibility of continuing to work following the dissolution of distinctions between art and anti-art. His answer was to challenge the artworld's hostility to style, a project which had much in common with the revivalist sartorial pranks initiated by Glitterbest fashion in the lead up to the seminal 1981-2 *Pirates Collection*.

Johnny Rotten would wear a velvet collared drape jacket (ted) festooned with safety pins (Jackie Curtis through the New York scene punk), massive pin-stripe pegs (modernist) a pin-collar Wemblex (mod) customised into an Anarchy shirt (punk) and brothel creepers (ted).⁹⁷

Like a pirate you plunder everything you want from your world culture... it's like your treasure and you take everything there that is great, warm, human...⁹⁸ [Figure 14.12 Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, *Pirate Collection*, (1981)]:



Fields adopted similar tactics of attrition, estranging historical art forms in order to subvert and deny the value systems that accompanied them.

Stylistic clichés, things that are already modified, are the vehicles for Duggie Fields' paintings. The people in his pictures have been selectively bred according to the dictates of Standard Glamour until their accessories - cocktail gloves and jock straps, chic chains and evening wear - are essential to their existence in the way the arms and legs and tops of heads are not. They are extreme Presentation, incarnate: and they pose in landscapes winking with beacons of the Greats of Modern Art, themselves everyday clichés of Style.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ FAURE WALKER, "The Claims of Social Art and Other Perplexities", p20.

⁹⁷ SAVAGE, "The New Hippies", *The Book With No Name*, Omnibus, London, 1981, p40.

⁹⁸ VIVIENNE WESTWOOD quoted in JOHN A. WALKER, *Cross-Overs: Art into Pop, Pop into Art*, Comedia, London, 1987, p88.

⁹⁹ JUDY MARLE, "Understanding Nature", *Seeing is Believing: Paintings and Drawings by Duggie Fields*, IKON Gallery, Birmingham, March 1st - April 3rd 1980, p3.

Although flavoured with motifs from artists he admired - Miro, Mondrian, Dali, Bacon, Pollock among others - Field's reverence for them seldom influenced the style of his work since his appropriational procedure was adopted to produce a celebratory visual play as opposed to an 'art argument'. The construction of a successful art argument would have ensured his work art status, achieving its relevance through its represented knowledge. While returning to an art of objects, Fields' was attempting to produce works which would make questions of status redundant, heightening the prospect that we may choose visual artworks rather than written texts for the important information on culture's unfolding ways.¹⁰⁰ This idea is partially clarified if we consider that one of Fields' most representative works was the decoration of his flat at 29 Wetherby Mansions, Earls Court Square, London SW5 [Figure 14.13].¹⁰¹



First he designed a sofa in the shape of a pair of lips n legs, in homage to Man Ray's lips painting and Dali's Mae West sofa... [...] Next he designed a chair with arms in the shape of a palette, and a magazine rack to match. Made of cheap blockboard in simple shapes, it is Fields' personalised version of the Rietveld chair. The palette thereafter became his trademark.¹⁰² A shrouded shackled figure lurks in the corner behind the modern television and video set-up in the bedroom, and on the only visible bookshelves Barbara Cartland sits cheek by jowl with Brian Aldiss, Walt Disney with Picasso.¹⁰³

Fields spent twenty years recontextualising all recognised markers of art in the same instantly recognisable, brash Pop style; using flat areas of vivid colour on which forms were outlined in matt black produced an aggressive, hard-edged quality. Fields lovingly refined the abstract aspirations of the ubiquitous mod-Bauhaus home and institutional design of the 1950s and 60s, with its penchant for petroleum-based plastics, vinyl leatherette, and acrylic fibres. Windows were covered with red and black plastic strips, some walls were painted to simulate wood, others with small versions of his landscape paintings and relieved with found objects such as the torso of a mannequin, a wickerwork plantholder in the shape of a pair of plaster

¹⁰⁰ "I take all my figures from magazines at some stage. I sit down with a magazine and trace them. [...] I go through the same old magazines and use them like a reference library for the same image can prompt very different directions. I have lots of fashion and pin-up magazines." FIELDS in FERRY ZAYADI, "Interview with Duggie Fields", *Viz: Visual Arts, Fashion, Photography*, No.4, April 1979, p13.

¹⁰¹ Fields' pre-empted the 80s interior design boom, sustaining the market for his paintings by making them a part of the brassy 80s furniture. "He lives with his paintings for at least six months, and his most eager of buyers must wait, if necessary, to possess one." ELIZABETH TOPPIN, "Home is Where the Art Is", *Residence*, No. 17, October 1988, p37.

¹⁰² BEAUMONT, *Duggie Fields Paintings 1982-87*, p2.

¹⁰³ TOPPIN, "Home is Where the Art Is", p38.

legs, and plaster hands. The coffee table, firescreen, telephone and power sockets were painted in *tachisme*, while black and white paint was splattered on the floor, Jackson Pollock-style. Given that the exuberant, period colours and fantastic designs of such works emphasised design over structural efficiency, everything that Fields' touched was reduced to the common aesthetic denominator of surface, giving the impression that style was infinitely more important than taste: "impartiality and exploitation of the artificiality of painting goes along with Field's stated interest in style as an autonomous force, quite capable of surviving in the twentieth century media-landscape whilst severed from its original roots."¹⁰⁴ Fields' vocabulary ceased to be attached to any message, this semantic disengagement underscored by manneristic historical citation. In this Fields had much in common with his Pop predecessors, especially Andy Warhol, yet there remain factors which link him directly to his time.

It is advantageous to relate Fields' preoccupation with style to the media expansion of the later 1970s, a boom which permitted the flow of images on an unprecedented scale. Although COUM had sought to manipulate and subvert the mass 'aestheticisation of culture' by striking *at* the market, Fields' preference was increasingly for multi-media modes of signification which would simply compete against those of the mass media for capital *in* the marketplace. Like McLaren, Fields' took the Situationist concept of detournment not as a weapon with which to terminate culture, but as a tool which would allow him to pick away at the threads of cultural history in order to produce a slickly co-ordinated consumer package. In all of this, Field's followed McLaren's programme of 'detourning detournment', re-establishing and celebrating cultural stereotypes, rather than disrupting and exposing them as a product of alienation: "It is hardly surprising, given the strength of the Situationist International's narcissism, that this current could be developed in the 1970s and 1980s into an apolitical aesthetic of extremism."¹⁰⁵

In the pop world, this concept was having similar effect as McLarenite New Romantics maligned the nihilism and amateurism of Punk, re-establishing the perfectionism of pure 'power-pop', while placing increasingly greater emphasis on image and 'product'. From this emerged a superficiality that would often border on neurosis. Following Fields' line of reasoning Steve Strange, ex-frontman of punk outfit The Moors Murderers¹⁰⁶, formed the

¹⁰⁴MICHAEL BILLAM, "Duggie Fields at the Roundhouse", *Artscribe*, No.24, August 1980, p60-61.

¹⁰⁵ALISTAIR BONNETT, "The Situationist Legacy: It's All So Unfair!", *Variant* 9, Glasgow, Autumn, 1991. Bonnet goes on to observe that this "tendency has been supported by a second feature of situationism, its equation of the spectacle with all-encompassing alienation. The trouble with this idea is that it doesn't leave much room for purposeful struggle but only the directionless mutation present realities, or what Vaneigem called 'active nihilism'. The logical conclusion of this theory is exactly the kind of tedious celebration of meaninglessness seen in the work of Baudrillard and many post-modern artists."

¹⁰⁶The Moors Murderers were formed by Strange and Chrissie 'Hindley' Hynde, later of The Pretenders, in January 1978. Wearing bags over their heads to protect their anonymity, they recorded a single entitled *Free Myra*, [Popcorn 1978] the lyrics of which claimed that Hindley was framed by Brady, and

'collective studio project' *Visage* in 1979 with *Blitz* DJ Rusty Egan, Midge Ure and Billy Currie of Ultravox, and John McGeoch, Dave Formula and Barry Adamson from Magazine. Announcing it "leisure time for the pleasure boys", they quickly found themselves invited to all the right cosmopolitan parties with rich high profile social termites so despised by punk, and henceforth became the music press' whipping boy. Robotic beats, banks of varied synthesisers, flattened vocals, and the message of terminally repeated choruses concealed the void between dead-end daily jobs and night time fantasies of the 'New Darlings of Decadence', who, deriding the conventionality of fashionable outrage, heralded the new order of posing: "New styles, New shapes / New modes, they're to roll my fashion tapes / Oh my visage / Visuals, magazines, reflex styles / Past, future, in extreme / Oh my visage." The 1982 retrospective album *The Anvil* (Polydor), named after New York's infamous leather 'n' bondage dive, was launched at Strange's very own Paris fashion show. The album cover saw Strange in a Luchino Visconti movie still photographed by the master of soft porn and presentation incarnate, Helmut Newton. Inevitably, Saville was responsible for the ceremonial graphics.

Yet Fields' desire to substantiate and enrich his own image by depicting his own body as the source his style had preceded this quintessentially New Romantic trait. When Fields' highly stylised image was not cropping up in his pictures, the belligerent lines of his punkish clothes and hairstyle were being mirrored in the equally contrived signature of his draughting manner. Warhol's blank gaze was, in effect, replaced by the winning smile of the PR man. Fields "pushed the boat out for the new sensibility, self-conscious, equivocal, eclectic, Post-Modern."¹⁰⁷ While seeming to jettison the well-worn Pop Art preoccupation with the mass-media's account of glamour and stardom, Fields was in fact presenting himself as the luminary, as his own product endorsement.

What remains remarkable, however, is that this preoccupation of Fields' went unnoticed during the sixties and early seventies. It was then that Fields had had his first taste of fame, sharing his flat with Syd Barrett: "[Syd] swapped his mini for a pink Pontiac Parisian push-button convertible. Riding around town in it was excruciating - *everyone* used to come up and stare inside at us."¹⁰⁸ Although Fields went on to paint portraits of glam-rocker Marc Bolan and punk luminary Sue Catwoman, his status remains as *the* post-punk artist, a tag clarified in 1980 when his acrylic painting *Acquired Mannerisms* (1973) was reproduced on the sleeve of *Careful*, by Californian new wave band The Motels (Capitol/EMI Records Ltd.), while his kiss curl androgyny, bondage fetishism and souvenir collecting mentality were being echoed by Soft Cell's Marc Almond.¹⁰⁹ The media having acquired his tastes, Fields,

should therefore be released. The group were the subject of much tabloid uproar, following publicity from *Sounds*. The single was never released.

¹⁰⁷ YORK, "Them", *Style Wars*, p127-128.

¹⁰⁸ FIELDS quoted in ANON, "The Man in the Drip-Dry Suit", *The Face*, 26, 1982, p65.

¹⁰⁹ SAVAGE, "Soft Cell: The Whip Hand", *Time Travel: From the Sex Pistols to Nirvana, Pop Media*

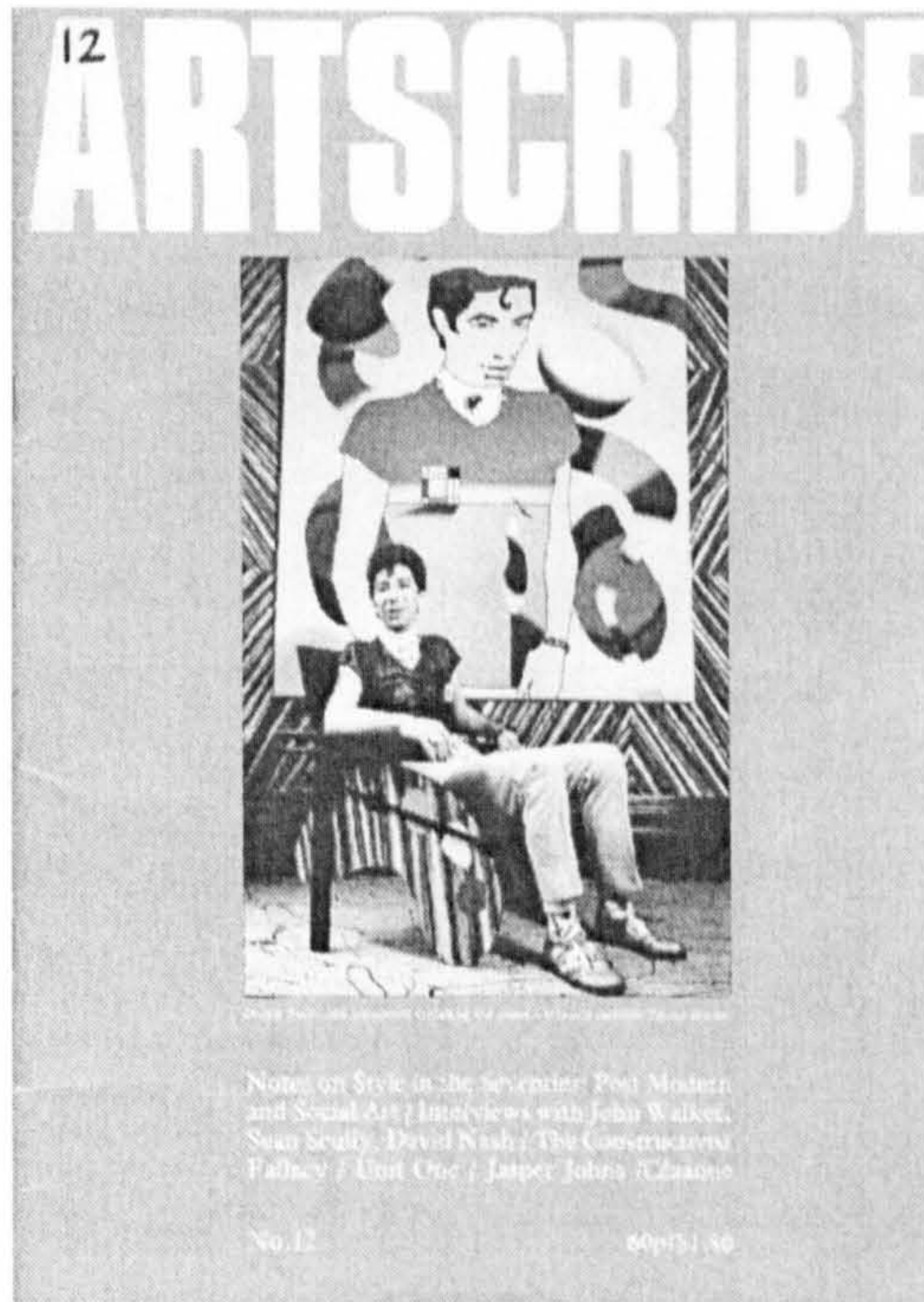
like Glitterbest, was celebrated in the early eighties as an exemplar of the laissez faire, post-modern artist capable of manipulating the media for his own ends. Although his work was featured in a number of serious art magazines [Figure 14.14 Duggie Fields on the cover of *Artscribe*], it was more common to find him in *Vogue*, *Interview*, *Harpers and Queen*, *High Fashion*, *Elle*, *The Face*, *Marie Claire*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Playboy*, the higher reading figures of such publications allegedly bringing increased publicity and sales.

In 1983 in the *Shiseido Perfume Corporation* of Tokyo was so impressed by Field's popularity and entrepreneurial spirit that it created a gallery especially for him. 40

pictures were shown between 19th and the 30th of January, at Suzue Gumi, Dai San 3 Soko, Takeshiba, Toyko. Meanwhile, the artist and his work were simultaneously featured in a television, magazine, billboard and subway advertising campaign for Shiseido perfume throughout Japan. For both left and right-wing populists, this signalled the beginning of a cherished post-modern dissolution of the boundaries between high and low, art and commerce - a disposition which became fully triumphant with the professionalised generation of *Young British Artists* (yBas) in the late 80s and early 90s. Others were not so welcoming.

Considering Fields' move in the wake of conceptualist and post-structuralist critiques of the author, the colourful costume of funk and fun which formed Fields' disguise was grudgingly denounced by a number of artists and critics as a corrupt device for exploitative artists to initiate an ingeniously covert 'justification' for the artist's re-participation in the heavily authorial game of modern western art. Fields was accused of infusing the market-place by transforming painting into a vacillating performance of vacuous motifs, indulging in aimless history-hopping rather than exercising a serious and long-established critique of representation. The nihilistic vision portrayed in Po-Mo was a dying myth from its inception.

...the irony and inauthenticity of much recent painting is a carnival celebration of the artist as trickster. Whether done in the name of 'popular culture' as in the work of Duggie Fields et al, or in the name of 'high culture' in the historical eclecticism of recent German and Italian painting, the effect is the same: the re-presentation of history as farce."¹¹⁰



and *Sexuality*, 1977-96, Chatto & Windus, 1996, p131-138.

¹¹⁰ JOHN ROBERTS, "Post-Modernism: Arrivals and Departures", *Art Monthly*, Number 55, April 1982, p28.

In refusing Kitaj and Hockney's 'legitimised' art exit, Fields was also accused of aiding the populist philistinism of the Conservative Selsdon Group's consumption aesthetics. York regarded Fields as an important guide "to the new [Thatcherite] Leisure Class that came up after"¹¹¹ him, a new moneyed class which rejected the academic values of the middle-classes, replacing the "pedantic rationality of 'good taste' [...with...] a pluralism of pleasure."¹¹² Although this appears to undermine York's claim that Fields' particular brand of Post-Modernism denied 'cultural hegemony', it does so in a highly oblique fashion. Eclectic Po-Mo became the dominant style at the turn of the 1980s, before it became the style of the new ruling class, the YUPPIES. However, Thatcher's emphasis on self-fulfilment, authenticity, and freedom of choice had an obvious appeal to participants in the sixties cultural revolution, many of whom were impresarios such as Fields. Hence, in Po-Mo liberalism, the consumer is king, driven by the desire to maximise pleasure. Fields was a part of the raw, uncouth, socially, psychologically and sexually insecure new elite who were either unable or unwilling to attain the 'academic values' associated with citizenship, values which had secured *some* members of the excluded a safe path to success since the war.

The fact that such changes easily swept through all aspects of visual culture at the end of the decade was not necessarily to Fields' advantage. The felt-tip graffito and typewritten amateurism of Xeroxed punk fanzines such as *Sniffin'*



Glue [Figure 14.15 Mark P, *Sniffin' Glue*, No.6, January 1977]¹¹³ *South London Stinks*, *Ripped and Torn*, *London's Outrage*, *Vomit*, and *Rotten to the Core* could be detected in the early issues of Terry Jones' *iD* (an acronym for 'Instant Design'). However, this magazine was quickly transformed into a market leader, as the editorial emphasis switched entirely to fashion, its punky credentials distancing it from advocates of the 'graphix' style found in anti-*Vogue* fashion journals of the late 1970s such as *VIZ: Visual Arts, Fashion, Photography*. With Garrett occasionally helping out with design, *iD* succeeded in switching the British Fashion Press' emphasis away from prosaic interviews with 'Them' designers such Zandra Rhodes and the Logan Brothers, and their artist friends Fields and Dick Jewell.¹¹⁴ Instead was

¹¹¹ YORK, "Them", p127-128.

¹¹² CHAMBERS, "Urban Soundscapes 1976-: The Paradoxes of Crisis", *Urban Rhythms*, p199.

¹¹³ One of the first punk fanzines, twelve issues of which were written, designed and photocopied and stapled together by former bank clerk Mark P between July 1976 and 1978, before handing it over to Danny Baker. Reprinted as MICHAEL DEMPSEY, *The Bible*, Big O Publishing, London, 1978.

¹¹⁴ See ZANDRA RHODES talks to her good friend DUGGIE FIELDS, *Viz: Visual Arts, Fashion, Photography*, No. 6, 1979, p20-22.

lucid reportage of the outrageous fashions being worn by unknown, working class revellers¹¹⁵ on 'the streets' and at venues such as *Blitz* in London's Covent Garden, where nightclubbers had been turning up as living works of art, dancing and trying to *be seen*. Here was a sharp, timely contrast to the grubbiness of punk. Theatrical get ups; swashbuckling pirate clothing, Kabuki masks, make-up, and transvestites were all welcomed. Chelsea setters such as Fields, Jewell and Andrew Logan were all regulars, but found themselves regularly upstaged by sad Pierrot clowns, majorettes, toy soldiers, puritans and Carmen Mirandas hailing from the suburbs. *VIZ* went into receivership, while the Steve Strange inspired 'Eighties Set' took off. Following two entire editions of *The Face* (English for *Visage*) devoted to them,¹¹⁶ a host of Romo clubs such as *St. Moritz*, *Hell*, *Le Kilt* and *Le Beetroot* were spawned. 'The Now Crowd' suddenly became an international movement, 'The Cult with No Name', with an article in *Time*, and lavish spreads in Continental magazines from *Stem* to *Vogue*.

Figure 14.16 (left) Terry Jones, Page from *iD* March 1981, showing street styles ranging from Traffic Warden to Punk.

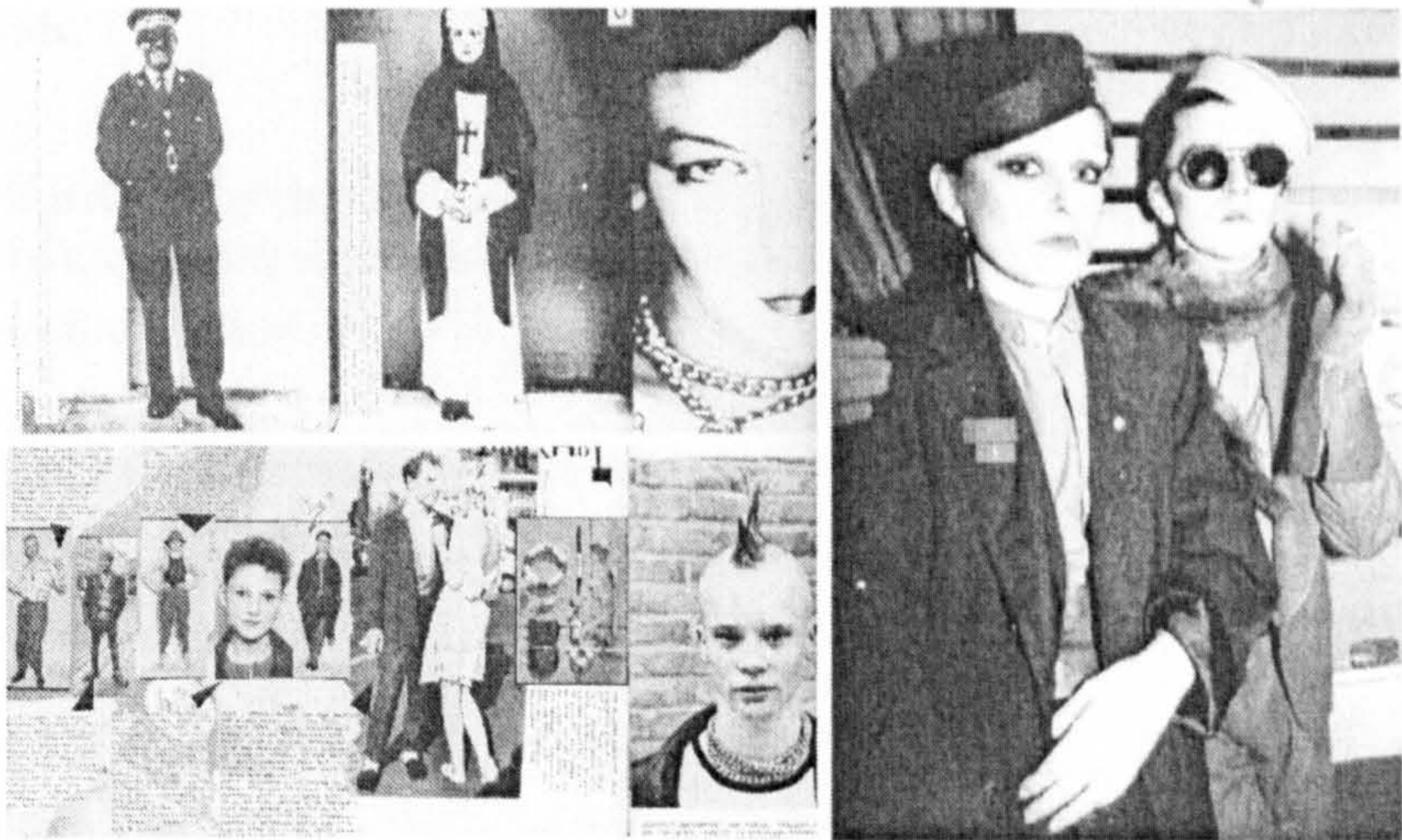


Figure 14.17 (right) Steve Strange and Rusty Egan sporting the Ruritarian Toy Soldier Style at *Heroes*, Covent Garden, 1978.

Such Po-Mo plays with the odd, the surprisingly kitsch and the historically redundant, openly invited the erasure of historical claims to knowledge made by the academic estate. The refusal to define limits (since everything is aesthetic there is no 'real' difference to speak of), could be seen to be complicit with an increasingly conformist Thatcherite society. In this sense, such liberalism denied difference, limiting any discussion of 'Po-Mo' to an empty re-introduction of the referent, an ahistorical re-investment in already codified and established

¹¹⁵ "Contrary to many people's assumptions, they weren't spoilt brats who actually had enough money behind them to own the clubs. They simply took the risk of hiring the places regularly one evening a week and taking enough money out of the receipts to keep themselves in porridge and eye-liner. Steve would stand outside vetting the punters to sift out the trouble makers and anyone likely to destroy the sympathetic atmosphere. Rusty Egan, formerly the Rich Kids' and later The Skids' drummer, was the DJ. His choice of music mixed Bowie and Roxy with more electronic 'futurist' dance tracks from Kraftwerk and their clan. In the early days he just couldn't get enough of it." STEVE TAYLOR, "STRANGE TALES ...of Steve Strange (ne Harrington, soul boy, punk rocker, exhibitionist, leader of fashion and leader of Visage.)", *Smash Hits*, 22nd January 1981.

¹¹⁶ *The Face*, Nos. 7-8.

'styles'.¹¹⁷ Punk's corrupt zone of intersection, mediation and cross-pollution, was further diluted to scepticism, irony and the replaying pre-established formulas. As such, Fields' wholesale denial of 'authenticity' might be seen to have provided a powerful practical guide for the aesthetic masking of the effects of Thatcherite economics by a plethora of ostentatious Po-Mo embellishments:

There is no understanding in this attitude that culture is something which can be lived, that different cultures can be incompatible and antagonistic. What the attitude also reveals is an implicit imperialism: it is the affluent Westerner who can afford to exploit the exotic and 'primitive' cultures of foreign - usually Third World - lands. Members of Culture Club gave idealistic reasons for their borrowings: they saw themselves as harmonising 'the family of man'. Such harmonisation can easily be achieved at the level of imagery but not so easily, alas, in reality.¹¹⁸

With hindsight, however, it might appear that such criticisms would have been unfairly waged at New Romantics such as Fields.

I think most of us are very brutalised by the environment we happen to live in. Its nobody's fault particularly, but, certainly what you label glamour, can be a counteracting force. So can be used and needs to be used as such.¹¹⁹

To place blame on Fields paintings for the effects of Thatcher's monetarist policies certainly seems over zealous, if not sensationalist. Indeed, Field's status as an entrepreneurial artist has been somewhat misconstrued. Fields' claimed that his involvement with Shiseido, was a matter of necessity rather than design.¹²⁰ Ironically Fields, was a much a casualty as a benefactor of Thatcherite arts policy aimed at 'democratising the culture industry' by turning it over to the private sector. The politically motivated cuts in Arts Council spending which necessitated that artists look elsewhere for funds created an environment in which Fields had

¹¹⁷See DOUGLAS CRIMP, "Appropriating Appropriation", *Image Scavengers: Photography*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1983.

¹¹⁸ WALKER, *Cross-Overs*, p88.

¹¹⁹ FIELDS in FERRY ZAYADI, "Interview with Duggie Fields", *Viz: Visual Arts, Fashion, Photography*, No.4, April 1979, p13.

¹²⁰ "I started off with little bits of media and then approaches to have exhibitions. Approaches... quite extraordinary; like you have an exhibition here, this reception there, a TV documentary - that sort of thing. After a year of different offers eventually one of them did happen and the one that worked had me doing TV commercials. I had a lot of press coverage, national television and news coverage... It was big business. [This was] Refreshing in some ways but not in others, in some ways it was complete exploitation. [...] ...not [just] by me. I hadn't got a clue what I was getting involved in. I got offered money that would pay my bills and all of us have that problem of earning money. Living in England as an artist is very difficult for anyone, and with the amount of support I have had from the English establishment, particularly difficult for me." FIELDS, interviewed by MIKE VON JOEL, "Duggie Fields: Dynamic Perversity and Other Such Stories", *Art Line International - Art News*, Vol. 3. No.10, 1988, p11.

to increasingly suppress his desire to paint, in order to pay his bills as an advertising agent.¹²¹ Fields' interests, it would seem, were powerless in the face of the Conservative's beloved 'public endorsement'. The passion for 'diversity' manifested in Post-Punk 'art' was dramatically at odds with and accompanied increasingly harsh governmental and policies towards the disenfranchised. Although painters were certainly better able to progress in their careers as 'professional artists' following Fields' lead, it is important to remember Walter Benjamin's caveat that to give the 'masses' an opportunity for 'self-expression' without a corresponding economic and social equity is a characteristic of fascism.¹²² Contrary to the Conservative's pre-election promises, it would seem that in the early 80s, culture was not endorsed by thematics decided by the public, but by the interests of big business. But, did Thatcherism provide us with the 'culture' we deserved?

To suggest that situationist theory has been hijacked by the capitalist media is to credit the former with a critical rigor it did not achieve and the later with a totalising power it does not possess. [...] if we accept that the situationists not only created the total revolutionary critique but that this critique has been recuperated, then we resign ourselves to whatever fate society allots us.¹²³

¹²¹ "I have never managed to be a travelling salesman who gone abroad and I have never wanted to be one. [...] Had I gone to America I would have made money that is for sure, but if making money was my concern in life I would never have worked to be a painter."¹²¹ I don't wish for a lot of money. I'm very thankful that I can do exactly what I want to do day after day, which is paint. Fame can make one paranoid." FIELDS quoted in ANON, "The Man in the Drip-Dry Suit", p65.

¹²² See STEVEN WILLATS' *Night People*, a photo-text project on the New Romantics undertaken in the early 1980s.

¹²³ HOME, "Aesthetics & Resistance: Totality Reconsidered", 1989. "To stand back in disdain from the patent inadequacies of that society, and declare your undying hostility to its every manifestation, is an eccentric gospel of despair." RICHARD CORK, "Richard Cork's Reply to Ralf Rumney", *Art Monthly*, Number 18, July/August 1978, p22.

CHAPTER 15

Who am I? Where am I going? How much will it cost? Will I need any Luggage?

Does *Objects and Sculpture* conform to my picture of sporadic interest and consequent neglect? Does it exhibit 'a whole new wave in sculpture' (ICA bulletin), or does it bring together another partisan tendency which can be forgotten by the next season?¹

The young artist today is 40, because he has not been looked at for two decades.²

Approaches have become more eclectic, there are moments of a certain anarchic humour, and many of the statements are personal and direct. The artists have little reason to see their work as consciously avant-garde any more, and the self-confidence that this affords has allowed them to make work which can connect in a variety of more interesting ways with other parts of the world. The thunderclouds of an over-self-conscious avant-garde in sculpture have rolled away to reveal a clearer sky.³

Michael Compton says success 'is an art in its own right'.⁴ By implication, success is now the commodity, the art product. That's nothing new in itself. But only an overwhelmingly passive market - unquestioningly accepting what the corporate dealing system had to offer in a society determinedly resistant to ideas - could possibly accept a manipulation which creates 'success' *in order to be*, successful, with no apparent signs of dismay. The image of successfulness comforts the anxiety; the market seeks out an official art with that image.⁵

Hit by the winter of discontent, many private galleries that had shown the new art of the 1970s, such as Robert Self, began to close towards the end of the decade. Nicholas Logsdail had gained a modicum of respect from the publicly biased artworld by exhibiting and selling new art such as minimalism and conceptualism at the Lisson Gallery in London. When the new image came onto the market, Logsdail refused to cash in. He looked around for an alternative set of practices, a movement which did not appear to imply such a wholesale rejection of late modernism. Given that the emphasis had been on the politics or representation and art for social purpose, there had been little or no place for 'sculpture' (as object) during the late 1970s. There might be a case for establishing a heritage for the 'St. Martin's School' of 'sculptors': Barry Flanagan, Gilbert & George, Richard Long and Bruce McLean. Locating this gap in the market, Logsdail quickly lent his support to a group of mainly figurative sculptors who had begun to produce work in the mid-70s: Richard Deacon, Anthony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Bill Woodrow and Tony Cragg (included in a group Lisson shows in 1977 and

¹ MARK FRANCIS, "Objects and Sculpture", *Art Monthly*, Number 48, July/August 1981, p14.

² CHRISTOS JOACHIMEDES, "How They Got it [A New Spirit in Painting] Together", *Art Monthly*, Number 43, February 1981, p4.

³ LEWIS BIGGS, IWONA BLASZCZYK and SANDY NAIRNE, "Introduction", *Objects & Sculpture*, ICA and Arnolfini, London and Bristol, 1981, p5.

⁴ MICHAEL COMPTON, *New Art at the Tate*, Tate Gallery 1983.

solo Lisson shows in 1979, 16th July - 9th August 1980).⁶ Like the St. Martin's School, the Lisson Group also rejected the welding techniques of Anthony Caro, as well as the carving and modelling tradition of Henry Moore. However, unlike the St. Martin's School - whose work did not consist of sculpture as such, but of performances, temporary installations or photography - the new sculptors had no reservations about producing *objects*.

In the early 1980s important sectors of the public artworld appeared to embrace and manage the International New Image, while others scrambled around in an attempt to find an alternative 'British' tradition, looking at painters such as the School of London. At the same time, a rather different generation of curators was emerging in Britain. Rather than look backwards, Lewis Biggs, Mark Francis and Sandy Nairne worked with their peers - Cragg, Woodrow and Deacon. Again, while most promotional areas of the artworld were beginning to celebrate a return to painting, this group looked for a sculptural equivalent of the new image. They did not have to look much further than Logsdail's gallery. *Objects & Sculpture*⁷ - at ICA in London and Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol between 24th April - 1 May 1981 - was based around the Lisson Gallery stable of Edward Allington, Deacon, Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Margaret Organ, Peter Randall-Page, Jean-Luc Vilmouth and Woodrow, but did not include any examples of Cragg's work. Despite the fact that the group had already been broken by the Lisson Gallery, this exhibition marked the beginning of a boom in British sculpture based on the following principles:

The work appears to be decidedly 'impure' in utilising either base or rejected materials and with the frequent incorporation of actual real objects or images of real objects. It has strongly human connotations either in its scale, in its tactile qualities, in its images or through the evident ways in which it was made. The work expresses a rejection of space and form as areas of pure exploration, and is not directly connected with the environment in which it is seen. It does not involve a concern with the planar expression of mass and volume, and indicates little interest in a simply aesthetic rendering of line, colour or material. The work is neither figurative nor abstract, nor could it simply be termed as abstracted. It is associative, and in some cases is also symbolic or metaphorical. Although every work has different meanings, and different ways of signifying those meanings, together they seem to refer both to *objects* in the world, and to *sculpture* given some status as a category of special objects separated from the world.⁸

⁵ RECESSION PICTURES (Alan Shipway and Ian Edmonds), "Dismay", *Art Monthly*, November 1983, No. 71, p30.

⁶ See BEN JONES, "A New Wave in Sculpture, A Survey of Recent Work by Ten Younger Sculptors. New Prospectors: Shelagh Wakely and Tony Cragg, Lisson Gallery ", *Artscribe*, No. 8, September 1977, p16.

⁷BIGGS, BLASZCZYK and NAIRNE, *Objects & Sculpture*, 1981.

⁸ Ibid. p5. This stands in stark contrast to Andre's view of sculpture: "Works of art fundamentally in the class of landmines rather than signs. That's my own deep feeling. The linguistic aspect of art is tremendously overstressed, especially in the conceptual thing. It's part of the vulgarisation of our culture, 'What does it mean?' and all that." CARL ANDRE in PETER FULLER, "An Interview with Carl Andre", *Art Monthly*, Nos. 16 & 17, May/June 1978, reprinted in *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, Writers & Readers Publishing Co-operative, London, 1980, p128

This was not a straightforward rejection of the avant-garde. In fact, much of the new sculpture emerged from concerns of the late 1970s:

[Bill Woodrow] is reported as saying that many of his colleagues saw *Art for Whom?* at the Serpentine in 1978 and that they thought there was a way of doing it better... Interesting isn't it that of all those exhibitions of the 1970s [...] a leading young sculptor [...] should relate however negatively to the issues raised by that particular show *Art for Whom?*⁹ We may as artists be the scar tissue of Western Civilisation but it's better than being the camouflage.¹⁰

Such principles are clearly discernible in Cragg's sculptural experiments of the 1970s when he studied at the RCA. Here produced a series of ephemeral works under the influence of the St. Martin's School, taking a strong interest in nature and the landscape, drawing on the examples of Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Roger Ackling (who taught at the RCA), in addition to the work of Gilbert and George and Bruce McLean, and Susan Hiller's anthropological research-based activity.

For Cragg, the semiology of vernacular objects of 'culture' (as opposed to 'nature') that had preoccupied numerous British photographers since the translation of Barthes' *Mythologies* in 1973, became his *sculptural* preoccupation towards the end of the decade as he sought to relocate the fine arts "*within culture as a whole.*"¹¹

Popular culture, the mass media, new technology have marginalized art's mediation of culture as a whole. If Late Modernism was complicit with this - wanted, as Carl Andre said of his work, to create objects that had no equivalent in the world - post-modernism has thrown itself back into sorting out signs and icons and rituals.¹²

For example, the pseudo-scientific nomenclature of *Four Plates* (RCA 1976) seemingly refers the viewer unproblematically to the medium and subject matter until we are confronted with the sculpture in question:

Using four identical plates, Cragg broke three, spreading farther apart the fragments of each successive plate. While challenging the identity of these arranged fragments as plates, they are still perceived as plates because the model (the unbroken plate) is

⁹CONRAD ATKINSON, "Introduction", *The State of the Art and the Art of the State: Power Lecture Given to the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia, October 1983*, Working Press, London, 1991, p24.

¹⁰ Ibid. p29.

¹¹ JOHN ROBERTS, "Post-Modernism: Arrivals and Departures", *Art Monthly*, Number 55, April 1982, p27.

¹² Ibid. p27.

supplied and because in each group of fragments the circular outline is retained despite the expanding diameter.¹³

Cragg thereby draws our attention both to the instability of our semiotic categorisations and to the impossibility of non-categorisation. A note of irony is added when we consider that the artist is responsible for 'mis-shaping' the plate. True to the deconstructive bent of the mid-to-late 1970s, Cragg envisages his role as an artist in terms of smashing given forms and conventions. Yet Cragg differs in his intimation that the logos can never be eradicated, but in fact sustains the project of the late avant-garde. Although Cragg's work may have retained the self-referentiality of the modernist art which preceded it, it adds a subversive twist of self-decrepitating ambivalence, striking a difficult balance between an awareness of modernism's serious purpose and the element of 'play' common to all artworks.

In addition to creating a developmental break with modernist sculpture, Cragg's experiments also established a subtle dialogue with the Jencksian brand of postmodernism found amongst exponents of the New Wave:

What is at stake in this new sculpture, and what takes it far in advance of the "neutrality" of their generation's concerns, is the possibility of making some kind of sculpture which not only retrieves some sense of what it is like to be surrounded by objects and their signs but puts their effects to work. It is the putting-of-effects to work which distinguishes what I would call a "critical" postmodernism. This centres on a familiar distinction between making and taking. The job of the post-modernist artist is not simply to *make* things, to capture a likeness or identify with a particular emotional state, but literally to *take* things, to displace their identifications.¹⁴

By following John Roberts' concept of "putting effects to work", we can formulate a distinction between Cragg's bricolage and Jencksian Post-Modernism. Fields sought to stress the triviality of art in the postmodern era, adopting a semiological approach as a basis for a deconstructive theory of the image. By imposing on the viewer a significance that was merely an appropriational insistence on the presence of what he could not produce, Fields expressly thematised art's inadequacy in relation to articulating the complexity of postmodern existence. In some senses Cragg's work radicalised Jencksian Po-Mo, the collapse of any available symbolic code leading to his use of the atavistic found object. However, the manner in which Cragg puts his fragments to work suggests that he aimed to transcend Jencksian agnosticism by constructing a speculative sculpture from modernism's ruins.

In 1978 Cragg spurned deconstruction in favour of reconstruction, his procedure becoming predominately one of finding, sorting and organising fragments of the modern world into an objective and structured form.

¹³ MARY JANE JACOB, "Tony Cragg: First Order Experiences", *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture Since 1965*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, p58.

The epistemological construct of reference object and fragments arranged within a related shape, begun in *Four Plates*, continued to operate in Cragg's work for the next two years. It appeared most significantly in 1978 with *New Stones - Newton's Tones*, which for Cragg was a breakthrough, furthering this use of the object. [...] Here Cragg used broken bits of everyday utilitarian items, predominately those made of plastic. With this work Cragg found a means to endow banal objects with expressive power.¹⁵

New Stones - Newton's Tones (1979) Cragg laid out small coloured plastic in a rectangle following the sequence of Issac Newton's spectrum: dark red, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, dark blue and violet. The suggestion here was that art experience was no different from the experience of colour in everyday life, everyday life being signified by the discarded fragments used by Cragg to create the sculpture. There was also a shift from the romantic and rustic of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton in place of the urban and domestic environment. As far as materials are concerned, there was now little difference between Cragg's work and Andre's minimalism, which also *symbolically* evoked a non-art discourse. However, while *Stack* (1976 at RCA and 1980) and *Black and White Stack* (Wuppertal 1980) clearly mimicked minimalism formally (floor based geometrical structure) as structures they were contaminated, constructed from the mangled detritus of modern society, revealing the disorder masked by the slick surfaces of modernist aesthetics.

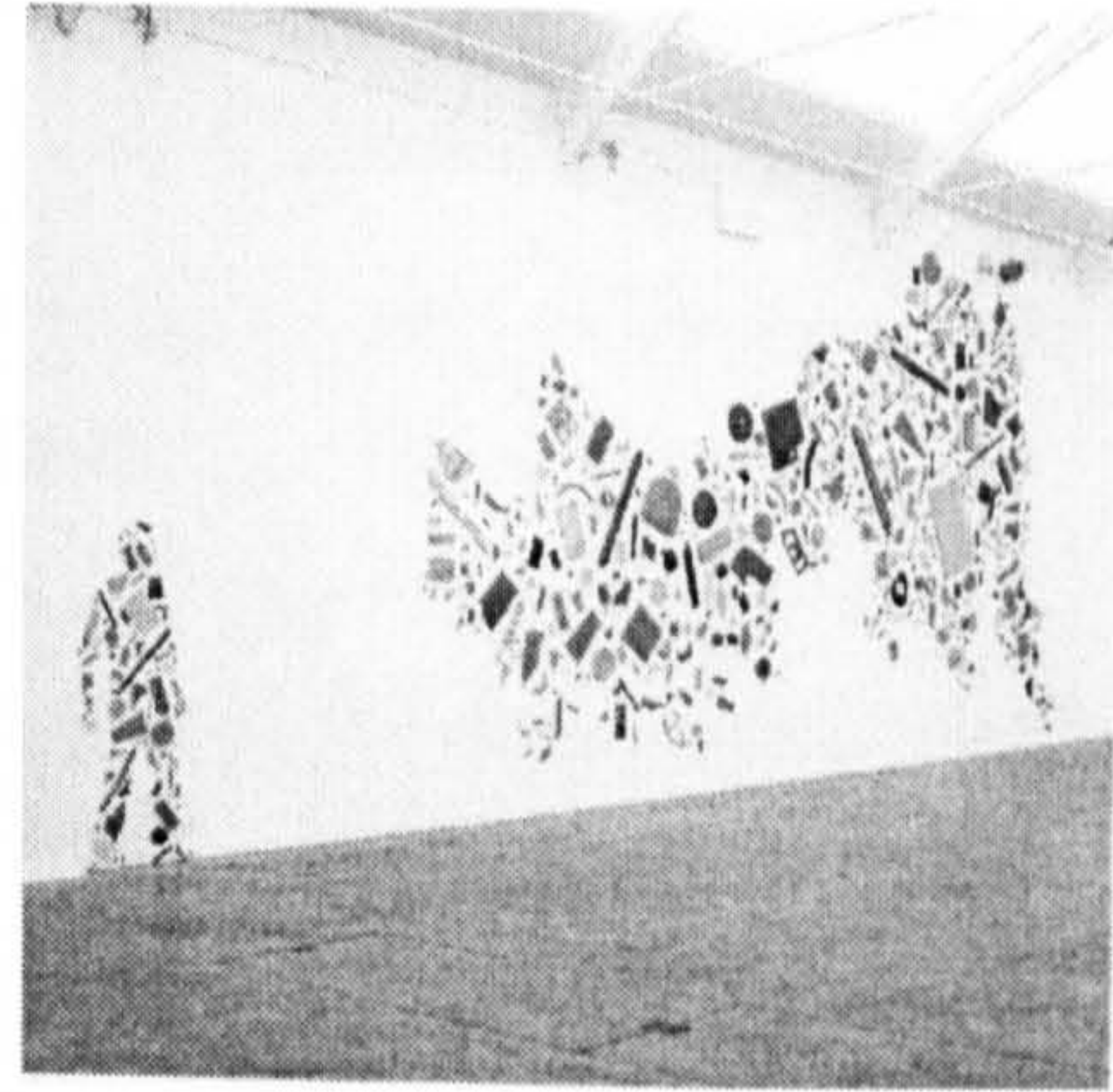
If *New Stones - Newton's Tones* undeniably referred critically to Andre's floor works, it marked a decisive break with minimalism's iconophobic disdain for aesthetic decision making and pictorial representation. This much was confirmed by *Red Skin* (1979) [Figure 15.1] which saw Cragg position a number of red plastic objects on the floor in a more painterly fashion, constructing the image of a Native North American. The iconography of the work seemed to have very clear links with new image paintings of the same period, particularly Malcolm Morley's paintings based on clichéd Western perceptions of Native Americans. Following works such as *The Streets are Made of Cowboys and Indians* (1980), *Red Indian* (1983) and *African Culture Myth* (1984) made these links all the more explicit, by placing the fragments on the wall. In this, Cragg's sculpture began to bear an increasingly close resemblance to Julian Schnabel's archaeological plate paintings. Cragg seemed cynical of the neo-expressionist trend nonetheless, as his satirical *New Figuration* (1985) wall assemblage insinuated.



¹⁴ ROBERTS, "Post-Modernism: Arrivals and Departures", p27.

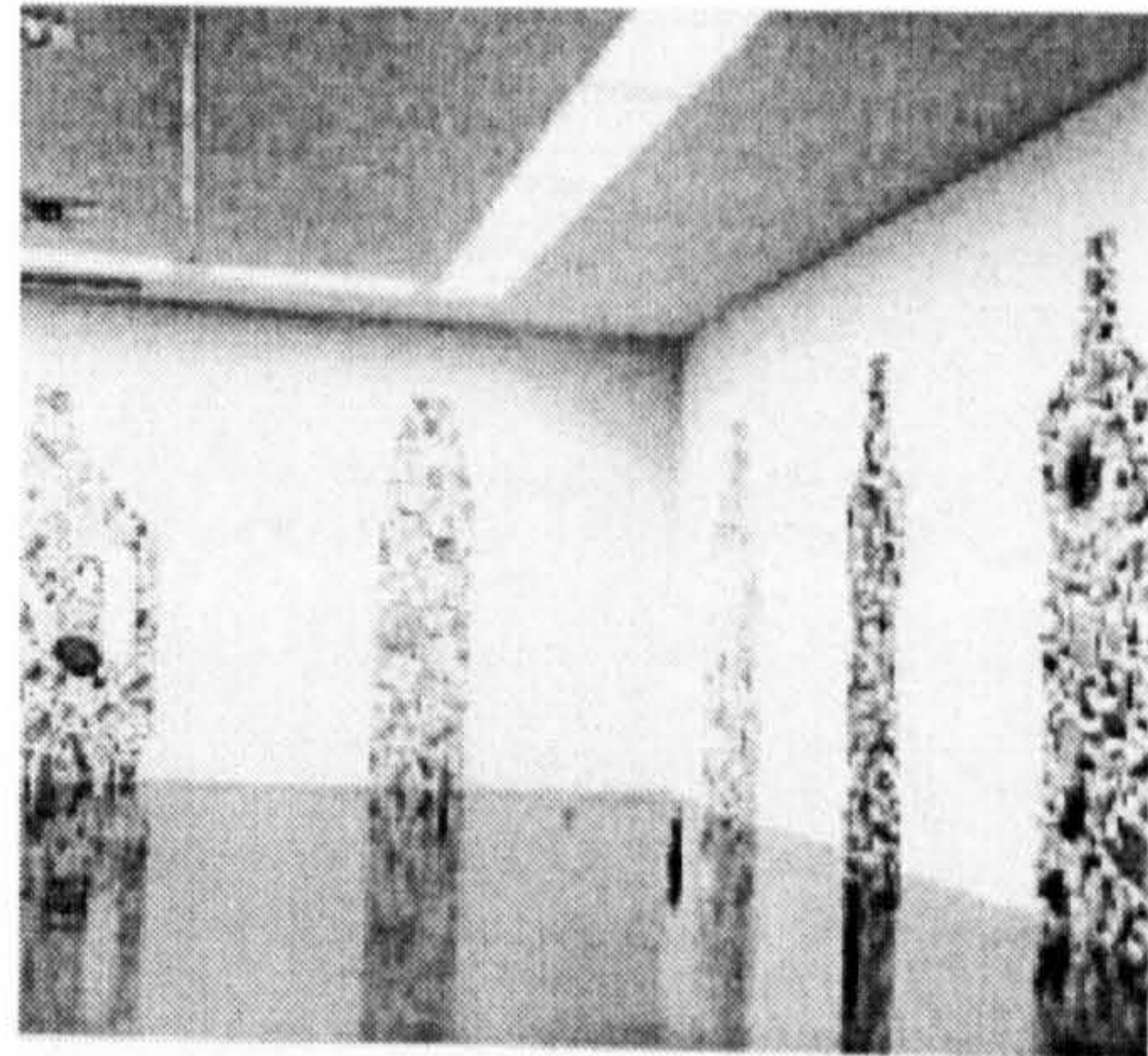
¹⁵ MARY JANE JACOB, "Tony Cragg: First Order Experiences", p58.

A simultaneous shift away from such vacuous emblematic cultural icons came with an exhibition of works held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery 27th February - 22nd March 1981 which engaged directly with current social issues: *Postcard Union Jack* (250 x 400 cm Purchased by the Contemporary Art Society for Leeds City Art Gallery 1981), *Policeman, Riot, and Britain Seen from the North* (1981) by a life sized figure [Figure 15.2]. This procedure reached its apex with Cragg's *5 Bottles*



installation, exhibited at the Lisson Gallery in 1982 (Tony Cragg: Sculpture 2-22nd December) and in Tokyo (*Aspects of British Art Today*, Metropolitan Art Museum 27th February -11th April) [Figure 15.3]. Here, a number of discrete elements, each a fragment of a brightly coloured mass-produced object, were formed into simple, decoratively appealing and easily recognisable shapes. Each silhouetted motif on the wall took its outline from the found plastic bottle on the floor in front of it, so that the image presented was a hugely magnified shadow cast by a three-dimensional artefact.

In *Blue Bottle* (1982) 237 x 90 cm, a found blue plastic washing liquid bottle served as Cragg's prototype object. Significantly, the prototype could be seen to comply with the rigorous construction standards of modernist design; it was manufactured according to the Taylorist system of production and clearly displayed its functionality. By setting this object apart, Cragg imbued it with an aura often associated with works by the



pioneers of the International Style. While this demonstrated the efficiency and beauty of modernist construction techniques, Cragg simultaneously suggested that the modernist ideal was flawed from its inception by constructing a large reproduction of the prototype object from the debris of similar artefacts. The broken detritus of Modernism here provided a 'real metaphor' for the spiritual and physical wasteland created by the structural rationale of mass-production society. Cragg's sculpture thus displayed a love-hate relationship with modernism. While it retained modernist notions both in its minimalist form and in its refusal to conceal the structure of its realisation, it simultaneously undermined this 'liberating' aesthetic by locating it merely as the seedbed of the modern disease of consumer fetishism:

The distinction between a healthy, natural and a diseased industrial/cultural world lies in the mystification of both. In their insignificance, categories such as these intensify

man's powerlessness against a fallacious progress which is solely geared towards either autonomous materiality or scientific specialisation.¹⁶

In this there appeared to be some similarities with Cragg's American contemporary Jeff Koons, whose 1981 exhibition *The New* directly addressed the parallel between the fetishisation of new goods in consumer culture and the fetishisation of novelty and progress in Modernism. Here Koons placed a set of 'found' *New Hoover Convertibles*, in Plexiglas cases reminiscent of both display cabinets and the minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. In this Koons was asking whether the pleasures we receive from new art objects was markedly different from that which we receive from new products.¹⁷ Cragg's silhouette wall sculpture *Hoover* (700 x 200 cm Museum of Art and Industry, Saint-Étienne 23rd January - 8th March 1981), presented a similar set of meanings when read in relation to conceptualism and minimalist sculpture. Conceptualist similarities were perhaps most clear in that he also often appropriated 'found objects' in the Duchampian / assemblage tradition. Yet for Koons and Cragg there were slightly different iconological concerns. For Koons, the vacuum cleaner was androgynous (it sucks and blows). Its function is to clean, implying minimalism's sterility. Cragg wallowed in similarly flat irony, the image of a vacuum cleaner being constructed from debris. In Britain, there was the memory of a vacuum cleaner being sent to the Tate at the height of the Tate Bricks scandal.

Cragg soon added a further twist to 'parody minimalism', applying the minimalist concept of systemic procedure to the practice of reproduction. In *5 Bottles*, he created massive reproductions of his prototype objects from other found objects of the same material. He was, therefore, able to reproduce his found source while maintaining a postmodernist stranglehold on his agency as an artist. Nonetheless, in this Cragg reminded us of the modernist notion of a self-contained realm of ideas. Both the prototype object and its representation were constructed from the same material and took on the same form, thereby becoming literal examples of the Modernist design concept of 'truth to materials'. At the same time, this concept appeared to be mocked, since the objects forming the representations on the wall, although made from the same material as the source object, clearly took on a series of different shapes and forms. Hence, Cragg appeared to resign the viewer to the poststructuralist notion that we have no hierarchy in which to fix our ideas, that the distinction between ideal form and arbitrary surface is untenable.

¹⁶ ANNELIE POHLEN, "Possibilities and New Ways: Tony Cragg's Sculptures as Experience 'Made Real'", *Tony Cragg*, Societe des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, Heinrich Winterscheidt, Dusseldorf, 1985, p20.

¹⁷ The theories of Jean Baudrillard were frequently cited in relation to such work. Referring to 30-second attention span American televisual culture, Baudrillard announced the collapse of the distinction between fiction and reality, between art and commerce. Such distinctions are allegedly lost as everything enters a marketplace of consumable signs, art simply becomes another commodity.

Additionally, however, *5 Bottles* also placed minimalism and conceptualism under scrutiny. Having negated the concept of artistic agency or expression, *ala* minimalism, the viewer is left to judge Cragg's work, ultimately by the purely external criterion. Having arrived at the notion that his sculptures might demonstrate a critique of modernist design ideology, we remain struck by the idea that the representational objects on the wall appear to *want* to take on the 'true' platonic form in front of them.¹⁸ Having no recourse to the artist's involvement with the production of the work in order to explain this, we are lead to read the work anthropomorphically.

The success and importance of Cragg and Woodrow's work rests on the incorporation of process-based sculptural values (recycling, improvisation, self-sufficiency) into the ambient world of consumerism.¹⁹ [...] What is so persuasive about Cragg and Woodrow's semiotics of the object and what carries it away from Pop and the host of epigones that this show supports, is that process (appropriation) and product (mythological emblem, symbol) are inseparable.²⁰

It is precisely at this point that the cerebralism of minimalist and conceptualist art breaks down. The rule of systems over the realm of ideas is fundamentally shaken. The self-referential ideology underwriting conceptualism appears neither self-evident (since it involves principles that are pragmatic rather than pure) nor self-contained (since it is incomplete). The conceptualist economics of contraction are not celebrated, but mocked by imaginative allusion, by way of an emphatic insistence on metaphor and metamorphosis. Although using the systemic procedures of the detached art of the Real, Cragg's sculptures created an opposite effect, asking us to 'see in'. In reintroducing the possibility of iconographic meaning by way of a postmodern dissatisfaction with this concept, Cragg seemed to achieve the impossible, forging a new set of deep structures from an endgame, postmodernist world of surfaces:

[My] initial interest in making images and objects was, and still remains, the creation of objects that don't exist in the natural or the physical world, which can reflect and transmit information and feelings about the world and ... [our] own existence.²¹

The use of mass imagery taking the form of consumer durables and packaging common to the Lisson School in the late 1970s soon became something of an orthodoxy in its own right. Reversing Cragg's procedure, Bill Woodrow took the skin of one styled product and turned it

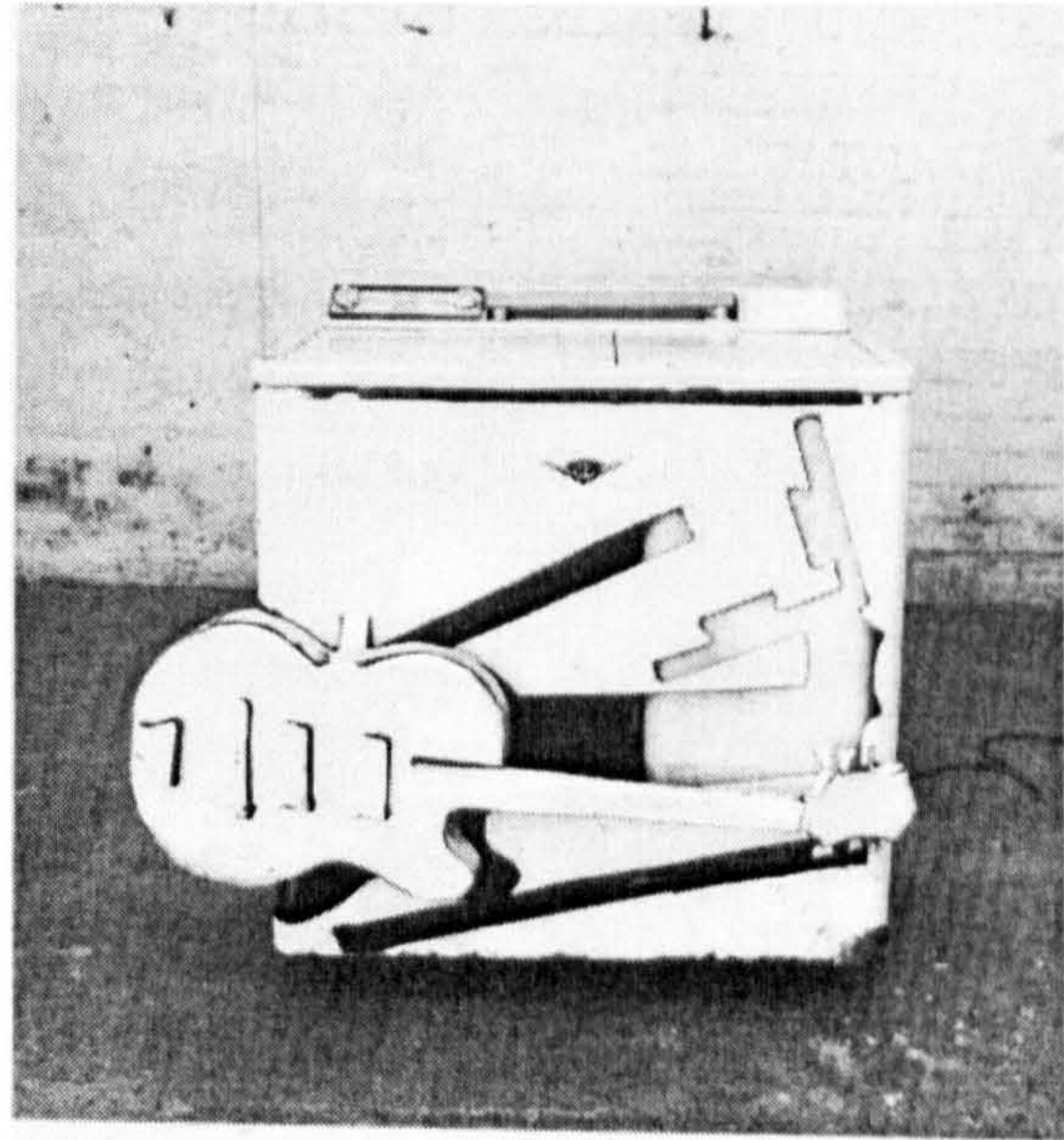
¹⁸ See GERMANO CELANT, "Tony Cragg and Industrial Platonism", *Artforum*, New York, Volume 20, Part 3, November 1981, p40-47.

¹⁹ ROBERTS, "The Sculpture Show", *Art Monthly*, October 1983, No. 70, p14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p15.

²¹ TONY CRAGG, "Pre-conditions", *Tony Cragg*, Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover, 1985, p39.

into a handcrafted image from another, for example a washing machine and a cowboy film: *Car Door, Ironing Board, Twin Tub with North American Headdress* and *Twin-Tub and Guitar*, (1981) [Figure 15.4]. The wit of the transformation was often startling and the underlying sardonic and social comment clear. However, it was a form of imagery equally active in the professional advertising world of the early 80s. When *The Sculpture Show* - co-sponsored by United Technologies and the GLC - opened in August 1983, John Roberts was roused to claim:



The Lisson boom is dead. Over the past two years since its 'launch' at the ICA and Arnolfini its contradictions have become more and more apparent. The conservative nature of the works' so-called pluralism (or rather arriviste historicism) is revealed in all its blatancy as little more than a British equivalent of American Dekor.²²

The show - selected by sculptors Paul de Monchaux and Kate Blacker and the critic Fenella Crichton and held at the Hayward Gallery and the Serpentine Gallery - was one of the biggest art shows ever staged in London, being all the more remarkable for being devoted entirely to the new sculpture of Cragg, Woodrow, Vilmouth and Allington and of young then little-known artists such as David Mach and Julian Opie. This second generation of Lisson sculptors not only prefigured the 'instant' success of artists such as Steven Campbell in the mid-80s, but the entrepreneurial sprit of the warehouse exhibitions pioneered by Damien Hirst at the end of 80s.

'Making It', became more important than ever. [Figure 15.5, Julian Opie, *Making It* (1983)] As Opie put it:

The new language is more personal than a pile of bricks. Where the Seventies were devoted to making sculpture that couldn't be bought, work now is more accessible and artists are unashamed to make money. Because it is less reverential, it's also more exciting.²³



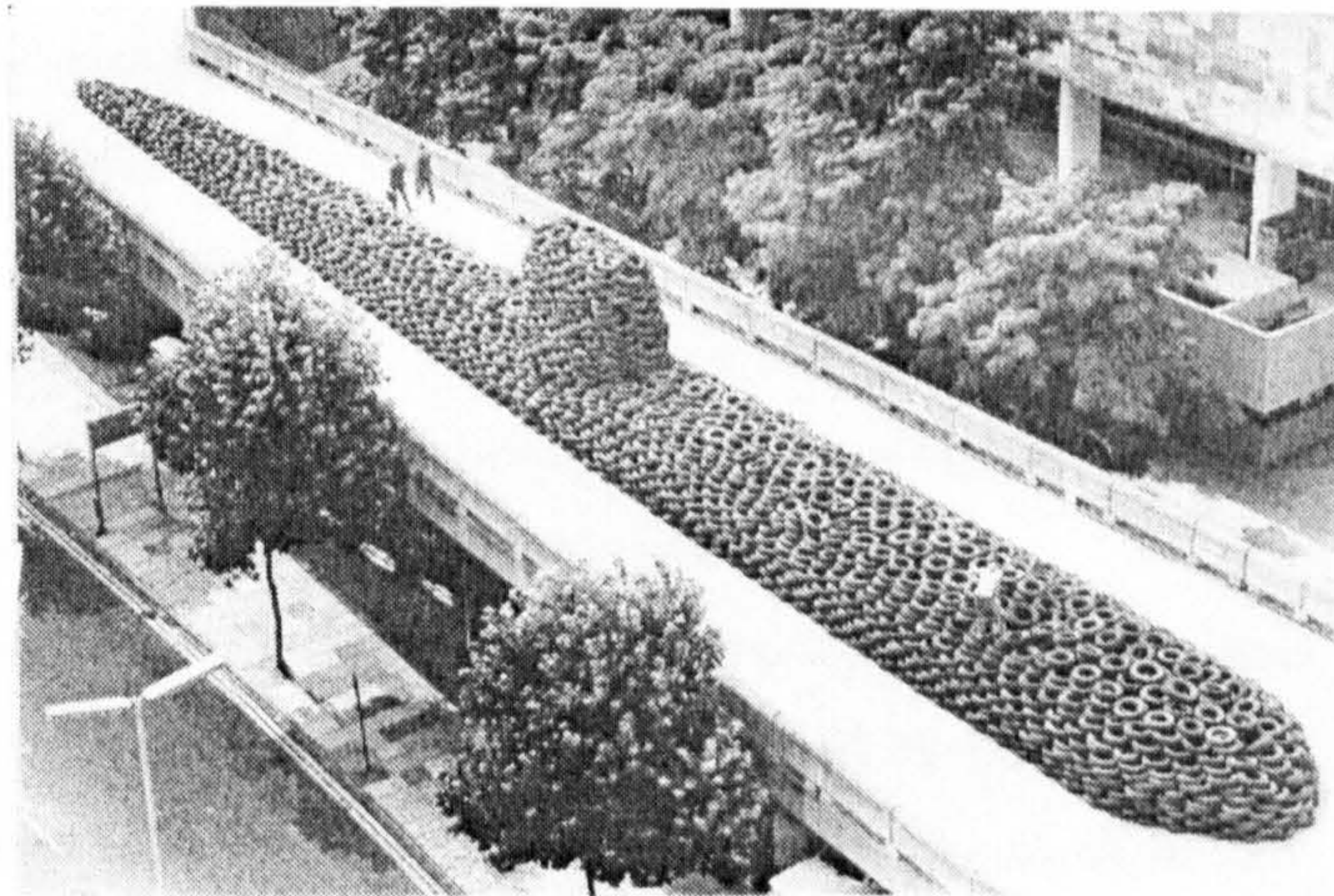
²² ROBERTS, "The Sculpture Show", p14.

²³ JULIAN OPIE in DAVID JOHNSON, "Intro", *The Face*, October 1983, p9.

However, the show can also be seen as a product of the 1976 art crises in that it was intended to be yet another PR exercise for public art quangos. With Mach as the public marker - *The Sculpture Show* was designed to promote the notion “that British sculpture had entered a populist, democratic and accessible phase.”²⁴ Notwithstanding, precisely by being so high profile, the show brought out the tabloid scandal mongers in new force:

It is almost as if though part of the show has been designed to deliberately play into the hands of the person who automatically assumes that what is called sculpture today consists largely of random assemblages of garbage or, at best, of pieces of industrial metal-work. In room after room the pervasive impression is of litter: litter scattered on the floor; litter piled high; litter painted and lovingly displayed or litter left to fend for itself.²⁵

Claiming that the latest generation of sculptors had got ‘Rubbish Down to a Fine Art’, the *Star* and the *Mail* ignored the differences between minimalism and its newer parody version in order to focus on the ‘fact’ that Mach had been paid £50,000 for *Polaris*, a 170 x 20ft sculpture in the shape of a submarine constructed from 6,000 car tyres. This, in actuality, was the cost of the complete exhibition, (minus the tyres that had been donated.) On Sunday 21st August 1983, *Polaris* was seriously damaged after being set alight by a “frustrated [furniture] designer with classical tastes.”²⁶ “The most constructive piece of art criticism we have seen this year,” was the verdict of George Gale writing for the *Daily Express* the following day. James Gore-Graham, from West Kensington, suffered 90% burns from the explosion, and died in Queen Mary’s Hospital three days later. It was decided not to repair *Polaris*.



[Figure 15.6].

The Lisson boom at the turn of the 1980s produced a new mixture of public and private funding of mutual benefaction. Curators, critics and arts administrators were reinvigorated with the birth of the new movement (photoconceptualists had written their own critical theory), and dealers had objects to exchange at inflated prices. For the first time in

²⁴ ROBERTS, “The Sculpture Show”, p14.

²⁵ JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR, “Playing into the Hands of Those Who Pour Scorn: The Sculpture Show, Hayward/Serpentine”, *The Times*, Tuesday August 16th 1983.

²⁶ FULLER, “Black Cloud Over the Hayward”, *Art Monthly*, October 1983, No. 70, p12.

many years, artists were free to profit from their work without being accused of hypocrisy as Lisson photoconceptualists and object sculptors had been in the late 70s. This reinvigorated artworld wanted to promote itself as a success, thereby attracting further investment leading to further growth. Following punk, the 'de-regulated' artworld finally learned that it *needed* scandal to attract free publicity, and new money.

As the eighties progress and it becomes increasingly difficult to tell a radical from a conservative the strategy of presenting an 'apolitical' stance has to be considered. This stance, like that of Punk in 1976, however, is a consciously political strategy intended as provocation. As Jean Baudrillard has said, 'Banality, inertia, apoliticism used to be fascist; they are in the process of becoming revolutionary' (*In the Shadow of Silent Majorities*). The notion of an equalisation of all signs calls for a strategy of 'radical eclecticism' designed to raise the issue of the relative rather than absolute nature of images against the aestheticising formalism of art and at the same time use the authority of art to undermine the reality of real life has become a familiar strategy.²⁷

One corollary of this was the establishment of The Turner Prize in 1984 by The Patrons of the New Art, a group of rich contemporary art enthusiasts pledged to promote the visual arts in Britain to a wider (paying) public, awarding £10,000 to the artist who had the finest exhibition in the previous year. Patrons included Nicholas Logsdail and Charles Saatchi. Nominees included Malcolm Morley, Richard Deacon, Gilbert & George, and Howard Hodgkin (all of whom then had works in the Saatchi Collection, Deacon selling through the Lisson). Deacon work's was not so readily commodifiable, nor did it relate directly to the international market for a new spirit in painting. Gilbert & George had been around for some time, and were more closely associated with performance art. Hodgkin, who had also been around for some time, was tainted by his appearance in *The Hard Won Image*: "I don't think of myself as part of a tradition at all. It's simply that the nature of moveable painting, paintings to hang on a wall, has hardly changed in the last four or five hundred years, there have been no new developments, there have been hardly any new colours, other than synthetic and therefore more stable versions of the earlier ones. And the functions of tone and colour, and line, have not changed at all."²⁸ Hodgkin was too conventional to lend initial credence to the prize, or British art, as being on the cutting edge of contemporary visual art internationally. In 1984, there were no *established* New Image painters in Britain:

To give painting intellectual legitimacy and a coherent, and therefore marketable identity, it was necessary to promote a complete break with the past, an antimodernist revolt, a new freedom. Morley also promotes this view of himself as a kind of courageous young man who went West, a free spirit who broke out of the shackles of Modernism, a pioneer of aesthetic free enterprise.²⁹

²⁷ GLYN BANKS, "Any Old Irony", *Art Monthly*, Dec/Jan 1983/4, No. 72, p32.

²⁸ HOWARD HODGKIN quoted in SANDY NAIRNE, *State of the Art: Ideas & Images in the 1980s*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1987, p116.

As all things to all men, Morley seemed the ideal choice for recipient of the first Turner Prize. The jury, of course, was immediately accused of tampering with the laws of geography, given that Morley had lived in New York for twenty years. The choice was seen by neoconservatives and progressives alike as rewarding Morley's part in the promotion of the *New Spirit in Painting*, out of which many dealers, critics and curators were rehabilitating their careers. Unlike awards such as the Prix de Rome which maintained educational and didactic ambitions, the Turner Prize was a quick reward for services rendered to the new rote. Morley was disgusted at the way the judges told him of his success - by phone at 1:30am - and branded the notion of pitting artists against each other as a "blood sport". Morley's scepticism towards the prize was confirmed in the following years in which the initial nominees all were awarded. Hodgkin won in 1985 - by this time a necessary gesture given how vociferous the neo-conservative agenda had been in 1984 - Gilbert & George in 1986, and Richard Deacon in 1987. No Lisson / Saatchi artist was left out. Tony Cragg won in 1988 followed, ironically, by Richard Long in 1989. Anish Kapoor was finally given his honours in 1991 when Channel 4 stepped in as sponsor to save the prize, offering an increased bounty of £20,000. Channel 4's role in presenting contemporary British art as spectacle directly benefited yBas such as Rachael Whiteread, Damien Hirst, Douglas Gordon and Gillian Wearing. Undoubtedly, the Turner Prize was, and remains, rife with corruption, opportunism and nepotism; The Patrons of the New Art abusing their relationship with the Tate promote their collections at a high profile, international level. More damagingly, the Turner Prize was an important catalyst of the current tendency of curators, Arts Councils and private sponsors alike to stifle any deviation from the cultural packaging and re-packaging of a benign culture of entertainment. Was there any alternative to the official, de-regulated quango's account of British art?³⁰

Certainly at Goldsmiths College, Julian Opie was an important example; he was having big shows, and I think he was very important psychologically, because students just suddenly thought, Well hang on, it is possible to do something similar, it is possible to get seen.³¹

²⁹WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK, "The Church of the New Art", *Flash Art*, January 1985, p29. It could be claimed that New Image Glasgow painter Steven Campbell filled this role. However, before his show at Riverside Studios in 1984, Campbell only exhibited once in Britain. He therefore did not meet the Turner Prize criteria in its first year.

³⁰ This shift in power towards the cultural management sector was aided by the kinds of work being produced around 1981: "The notion of taking in postmodernism therefore has a direct relation with the environment. The artist becomes a kind of anthropologist, or in Hiller's words, a 'curator'." JOHN ROBERTS, "Post? Modern? Ism?", *Art Monthly*, Number 60, October 1982, p17.

³¹ CARSTEN SHUBERT in ANDREW RENTON and LIAM GILLICK eds., *Technique Anglaise*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1991, p11.

In 1988, a year before he completed his course at Goldsmiths College, Damien Hirst organised *Freeze*, an exhibition of his own and fellow students' work in a Docklands warehouse. *Freeze* has since been heralded by many of its apologists as constituting an *entirely* new dialogue with the public:

Freeze was instantly cited as being of paradigmatic importance even though artists had been using such 'alternative' spaces regularly since at least the late 60s. Deanna Petherbridge had suggested in *Art Monthly* in April 1988 that art beyond the gallery was 'fast becoming appropriated by curators acting as entrepreneurs in the field'. That this was a well-established practice was made clear by then Goldsmiths lecturer Michael Craig-Martin, when in a March 1988 article (i.e. before *Freeze*) for *Art Monthly* he wrote of how Conceptual art 'made possible and new type of gallery. Single rooms in office buildings, small shop fronts, enormous spaces in old industrial buildings were opened as galleries.' *Freeze* was simply a recurrence of the founding myth of modern art: the *Salon des Refuses* of 1863.³²

The notion that there was some sort of break with the de-regulated Quango system of the 80s is tenuous to say the least. Despite, or because of the controversy surrounding his work, Hirst's attempt to deal with the 'public situation' has in fact simply seen a re-enactment of many of the problems and debates associated with the late 70s institutionalised avant-garde. Hirst is very aware of the problems and his attempts to deal with them are controversial. Like COUM, he is astutely aware of

...the media problem with England ... It's always been like that, but if anybody goes in off the street I think they can enjoy it. Whereas the media go, no, dead lambs are art, and people don't really think beyond that. People who read the media and don't go and see the exhibitions don't get a real idea about what's going on. [...] I think since Carl Andre exhibited in the Tate, that fucked it up really. The way the media dealt with that - they went 'Tate Gallery buys a pile of bricks'. I think what happens is these university graduates working on *The Sun* newspaper think that the people who read it are idiots, so they write this stuff, then the people who read it believe it. It goes right through the whole thing. But there is someone who is actually controlling what goes into the newspaper, and there's a kind of arrogance about the way that they do it. [...] They go to an art exhibition and they go, 'what is stupid about this that we can shock people with?' So in a way the gap between the people and the art is the media. The media fuck it up, they don't have that integrity, they don't have any responsibility.³³

Like Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, Hirst's work has been met with ridicule and protest. His carcasses preserved in glass cases filled with formaldehyde solution have provoked reactions from animal rights protesters among others. It comes as no surprise, however, to discover that the activities of such protesters were provoked by the press. *The Times* telephoned several such groups to gather their reactions to Hirst's Turner Prize winning *Mother and Child Divided*, presenting their views as spontaneous expressions of outrage, rather than as

³²SIMON FORD, "Myth Making", *Art Monthly*, No. 194, March 1996, p194.

³³ DAMIEN HIRST in *British Art Show 4 Website* 1995. (No Longer running)

predictable answers to journalists' probing. In this, they attempted to recreate the 'success' of Colin Simpson's article in the *Sunday Times* in February 1976 which was designed to provoke an art scandal over Andre's 'Bricks' by creating the impression that a scandal already existed.³⁴ What *The Times* and many other national papers failed to recognise was that Hirst, like a great deal of Saatchi-sponsored London-based 'Young British Artists' (yBas), fundamentally repudiates the long-standing aims of the Arts Council, given that he often displays his work with the specific intent of *offending* the public sensibility. *The Times'* complaints have been particularly futile and hypocritical, for it was their suggestion in the late 1970s that the culture industry must 'democratised' by being turned over to the private sector, which allowed Saatchi to dominate British art patronage and promote the very work they rally against.³⁵ Of course it could easily be claimed that newspapers must be well aware of this fact, and are simply continuing to create scandals in order to sell newspapers, just as Hirst *et al* create spectacles to sell artworks. Given that this is true, it does not detract from the fact that the right-wing Press are ignominious hypocrites. As such it might be asked why anyone continues to pay attention to their catcalls? The hope that the Press' complete lack of integrity might have begun to backfire was amusingly demonstrated, when *The Times* predicted (i.e. encouraged) an animal-rights protest outside the 1995 Turner Prize show which failed to materialise.³⁶

To complicate matters for the press, Hirst has, to some extent, remained one step ahead in the game. History had already repeated itself in 1994 when another tank piece *Away from the Flock*, was attacked by an artist while on display at the Serpentine Gallery's *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away...* (a group exhibition curated by Hirst). Like Andre's sculpture, the work was attacked with blue ink. This time, however, the attacker professed that he was attempting to 'improve' the work by supplementing its meaning. Moreover, the response from the artworld on this occasion was not of universal revulsion. Indeed, Hirst's recent artist's book *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, With Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now* contains a 'pop-up' translation of the work in question, inviting the reader to pull a tab which turns the illustration of the work blue. More recently, Hirst came under criticism from the British Pharmaceutical Society when he named his new restaurant *The*

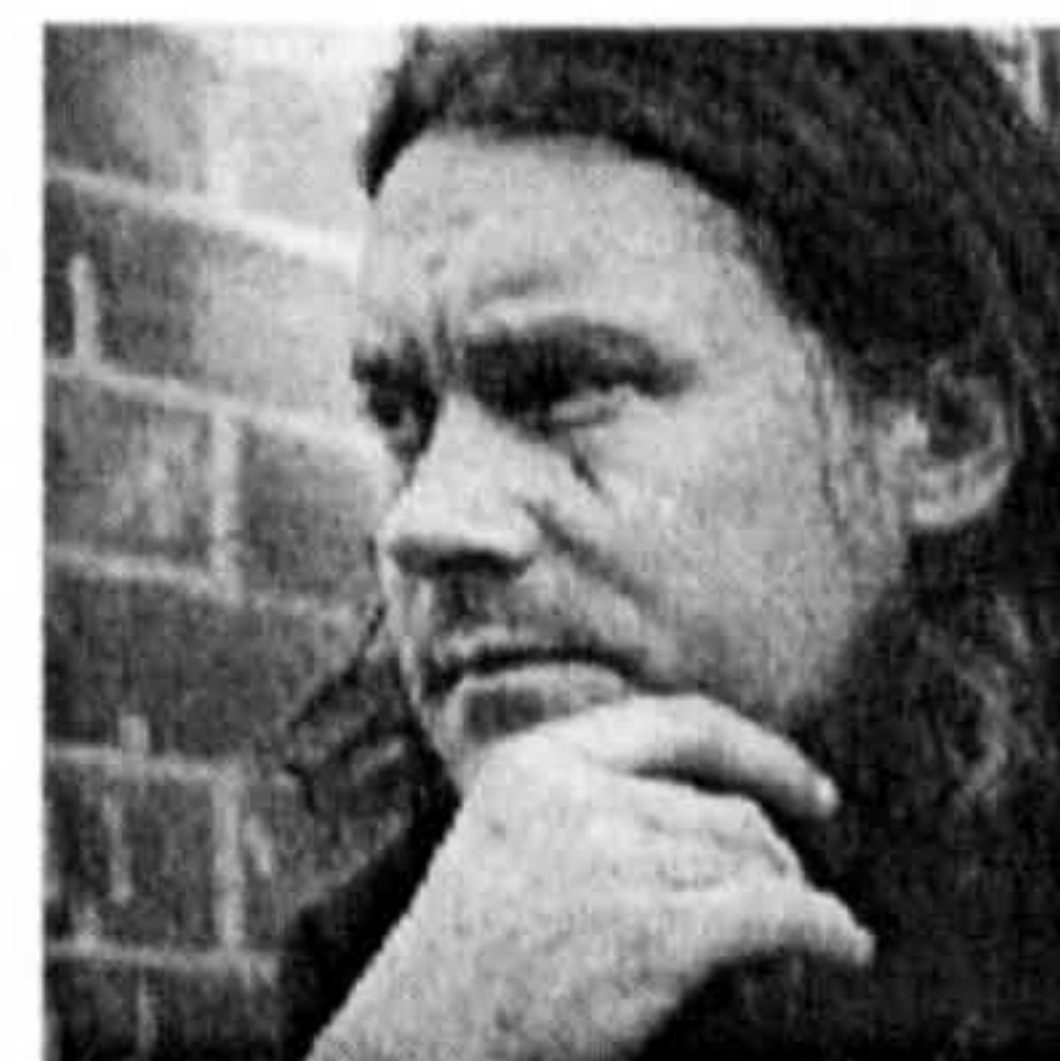
³⁴See COLIN SIMPSON, "How the Tate Spent £1 Million in Two Years", *Sunday Times*, 15th February, 1976, p53.

³⁵Saatchi's astute commercial acumen has allowed him to gain greater hegemony over the Royal Academy in London than George IIIrd, who had a poor relationship with Reynolds, the first President of the club. *Sensation* was cynically engineered by two mutual benefactors, formally consecrating Saatchi's yBas just before they become unfashionable, while aiding the cash-strapped Royal Academy with an injection of 'modish capital'. Expectations that the pejorative term 'sensationalism' will metamorphose into innocuous art historical nomenclature should not be underestimated, indeed it was probably part of the Ad Man's plan. Moreover, it could be claimed that it has been specifically designed by Saatchi to resonate with the crises in 1976-78 (see ANON. "The Times Diary: Anatomy of a Small Sensation [The Tate Bricks Affair]", *The Times*, February 19th 1976). Such a claim does not seem exaggerated when we consider that Saatchi was the man who capitalised on the 1976-78 crises with his 1979 'Labour Isn't Working' campaign for the Conservatives.

³⁶See DALYA ALBERGE, *The Times*, 30th October 1995, p3.

Pharmacy. Law protects the name 'Pharmacy' for use by chartered chemists only. Hirst's hope was that he would be sued as this would generate cheap publicity. However, the BPS were one step ahead of Hirst, realising that it would cost him more money *not* to sue him (until his restaurant has become established.)

Despite such minor setbacks, the sensationalism surrounding his work has entered Hirst, like the Tate Bricks before him, into popular culture. Dissected pickled cows remain the *sine qua non* of the British public's conception of contemporary art, despite the fact that they were first produced a decade ago. Much, course, could be said of the Tate Bricks.³⁷ Crucial differences between Hirst and Andre do, nonetheless, exist. During the Tate Bricks scandal, Andre remained invisible.³⁸ Andre, was simply an American whose name, not to mention face, totally eluded the popular press and their readers. The scandal concentrated not on Andre, but on the Tate for wasting public money. Indeed, it was a scandal which Andre never courted, the exhibition which sparked the controversy not even being his idea. In contrast, Hirst is a household name and face, "the Hockney of the 90s"³⁹, "the most famous living British artist."⁴⁰ It is not just that his work is famous: whereas Andre's Bricks have taken on a life of their own within urban mythology, leaving their creator as obscure as before, Hirst, in stark contrast, is an artist and curator renowned for who he *is* as much as for his work.⁴¹ [Figure 15.7 Damien Hirst] This fact has often been levelled against Hirst as a criticism: he is seen as a media manipulator (by the media!) who simply releases a new work into the public domain every few months and then lives off the scandal until the time comes for the next *coup de brilliance*.⁴²



³⁷ Which, to restate, were made in 1966, purchased in 1972 and exhibited 'controversially' in 1976.

³⁸ "I'm glad I wasn't in England at the time because the temptation to make a fool of myself would have been enormous. Mass media exposure like that is absolutely no use to an artist. It doesn't even help commercially. You don't have 100,000 brick pieces in a warehouse, like a rock and roll group's albums. I don't think I've sold a work in England since then." ANDRE in FULLER, "An Interview with Carl Andre", *Art Monthly*, Nos. 16 & 17, May/June 1978, reprinted in *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, Writers & Readers Publishing Co-operative, London, 1980, p110.

³⁹ ADRIAN SEARLE, "The Thirst for Hirst", *The Independent*, November 1st 1995, p2-3.

⁴⁰ DAVID LEE, "Damien Hirst", *Arts Review*, Volume 47, June 1995, p6-10.

⁴¹ Hirst often appears in colour supplements, the articles in which rarely concentrate on his work. See for example DANIEL FARSON, "Damien Hirst in the Flesh", *Sunday Telegraph*, 28th November 1995, p27. In this sense, there is a rebirth of the kind of attention to the artist with which figures such as Julian Schnabel and Steven Campbell were met in the early 1980s. The papers are now more aware of the ways in which they can profit from such exposure. A recent spate of articles in *The Observer's* colour supplement, for example, were produced with the understanding that the newspaper would secure rights to publish 'limited edition' prints of works by each artist featured. In conjunction with Habitat, the allegedly leftist *Observer* is seeking to ensure that the yBas become the David Shepherds of the early 21st-Century, while securing their own share of the profits.

⁴² LEE, "Damien Hirst", p6-10.

The use of scandal as an avant-garde provocation tactic no longer points a way out of this managerial cul-de-sac. *Sensation* an exhibition of the Saatchi collection of Young British Artists held at the conservative Royal Academy galleries in Mayfair at the end of 1997, ran into a great deal of controversy over the inclusion of Marcus Harvey's *Myra* - an enormous work painted using a child's hand as a template. [Figure 15.8] Harvey's painting had some success, its vandalism representing a challenge to the media's ability to control public perception. Press reports designed to cause moral provocation concentrated on the sensational aspects of the exhibition, using the police picture of child-killer Myra Hyndley which they made a household face. The advertiser's dream that images are not 'false', but define us, was borne out when the *image* was physically attacked. Yet the uproar was rather surprising given that Harvey's engagement with sex crime is nothing new in late 20th century British art (Jeff Nuttall, COUM, Vivienne Westwood's chic *God Save Myra Hyndley* T-shirts, The Myra Hindleys, etc.). In this context, Harvey's (and numerous other's) use of sex crime 'motifs' is entirely passé.



In September 1997 "BARMY artist Ross Birrell" claimed that "a lump of coal he found in a pub is a work of ART worth £3,333. Art critics and politicians have slammed the council sponsored show as 'madness.'" ⁴³ Birrell managed to stretch his national press coverage of his *Rough Diamond* exhibition, at Glasgow's 18 King Street Gallery, over a number of weeks by insuring the coal for £5,000 with Hiscox before stealing it, under the guise of the Society for the Termination of Art (START), and holding it to ransom. David Bowie was next in on the act with *Nat Tate*, published on the 1st April 1998. Bowie successfully conned an affluent New York audience and several hundred readers of *Modern Painters* (which he owns a large percentage of) into purchasing William Boyd's account of this fictitious Abstract Expressionist. ⁴⁴ More recently a group of final year Leeds fine art students, trained by Terry Atkinson, used a college grant to go on holiday to Spain. The press sprung to attention immediately, attacking their 'performance', spuriously entitled *Going Places*. The students were sent on holiday courtesy of Channel 4's *The Big Breakfast* following their revelation that the whole performance had been a scam. They are now enjoying equally sycophantic coverage in the yBa friendly art press. Given the range of people involved in faking art in the late 1990s,

⁴³ NICK GATES, "Artist is in from the Coal", *The Star*, Saturday August 3rd 1997, p10.

⁴⁴ As a patron, Bowie is interested in a vast array of aspects of the visual arts, though, as a performer himself, has a penchant for 70s self-mutilation performance. In his *Outside: 1* album of 1996 he casts his persona as an 'art-detective', on the trail of artists who commit elaborate murders as their performances.

and the ample rewards bequeathed to the most creative culture jammers, it is no longer possible to claim that a class war is being borne out in the artworld as it was in the late 1970s. *Everyone's* equalled achievement in this realm is now to appropriate the aura and romance of radicality to increase the desirability of their reactionary cultural productions. Some are more proficient self-promoters than others. It is Harvey's painting, with the backing of master kibitzers Saatchi and *The Sun*, which will retain the advantage of an instant mythology that has already ensured its entry into the official annals of British Art History.⁴⁵ Far from being critical of the rhetoric of capital, such contemporary British art *is* the rhetoric of pluralistic, postmodernist, post-industrial capitalism. Saatchi, if anyone, realises that its exploration and cultivation of the 'Other' is inherently compatible with the service marketplace. Is there any subversive voice for those people exploited by Young British Artists for their own ends? No one is innocent.

Figure 15.9 Ralf Rugoff 'Yours Sincerely' in *Frieze* Issue 42
featuring Press Cuttings from *The Leeds 13 Going Places*, October 1998.



⁴⁵ See John A. Walker's forthcoming book *Art & Outrage: Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*, Pluto Press, London, 1999.

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CHAPTER 15

Who Am I? Where Am I Going? How Much Will It Cost? Will I Need Any Luggage?

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