

The Palingenesis of the avant-garde

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

Jacques Camatte Against Domestication

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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