Selected Writings for & Model

Peter Suchin
Contents

Selected Writings for & Model: Introduction

Section 1: Autobiographical

Blend and Clash: *Theories of Discretion* (1989)
On Meaning Not to Mean (1994)
Lexical Vessels (1997)
A Note on *The Grey Planets* (2009)
Notes on Notes (2009)
A Sinuous Network: Introduction to a Private Library (2011)
Interview with Erica Sutcliffe and Liane El-Masry (2005)
Discussion with Jacques Rogers (2010)

Section 2: Essays and Polemics

The Treasure of the Perplexed (1986)
The Destruction of Art as an Institution: The Role of the Amateur (1988)
To Punctuate the Picture: Words upon Words in the Visual Arts (2000)
Ghosting and Greasing: Terry Atkinson’s “Disaffirmative” Art (2001)
Brian Eno and the “Quiet Club”: Subtle Beauty as Social Critique (2002)
Notes on Noise (2003)
A Sense of Silence: John Cage’s 4’33” (2003)
Process, Product, Practice (2005)
In Another Moment: Conflicted Legacies of Conceptual Art (2007)
Rebel Without a Course (2011)
Section 3: Book and Exhibition Reviews

Matthew Collings: Blimey! (1997)
John and Margaret Grant: The Individualist City (Series 1) (2000)
Carey Young: Business as Usual (2002)
Gustav Metzger: 1000,000 Newspapers (2003)
Jake and Dinos Chapman: The Rape of Creativity (2003)
Kutlug Ataman: Kuba (2005)
Gregor Muir: Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art (2010)
Art & Language: Portraits and a Dream (2010)
Notes on “Artist-Led” (2011)

Section 4: Other

Merz Lexicon (2006)
Recurrent Loop (2008)
Notes from the Black Box (2008)
Selected Writings for & Model: Introduction

Every critic is an autobiographer.
Richard Howard, “Foreword” to Michel Butor, Inventory, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 11

The present anthology, produced as part of the exhibition A Critical Contagion in the Quiet of the Night, contains some forty pieces of writing, extracted from a body of around three hundred published texts written between 1986 and 2010. There is one previously unpublished item. The selection is my own; the booklet was physically compiled with the assistance of James Chinneck.

Essays and polemical articles, book and exhibition reviews, catalogue texts and other writings on artists are all represented here. Several items commissioned as “artistic” contributions to books and exhibitions are also included. These latter pieces sometimes involve the use of constraints such as basing an entire text on the number 4 (“Recurrent Loop”, 2008), or employing a structure of twelve sections each comprised of exactly one hundred and forty four words (12 x 12 x 12), into which have been packed a large number of quotations culled from notes taken whilst reading, though this reading/writing had not been carried out with this particular text, “Notes from the Black Box” (2008), in mind. In most, though not all cases the anthologised versions differ slightly from the published ones; either they have been revised whilst compiling this selection (more for clarity than to alter a specific meaning), or are, occasionally, “restored” in that the text used is the original version, not the one containing a publisher’s editorial suggestions or in-house stylistic conventions.

When I accepted the invitation to exhibit at & Model I was well aware that the opening date of the show was less than two months away. Some of the pieces I wanted to include were not readily available in a form easy to print within the time available. Consequently, I have treated this anthology as a “fanzine”, accepting certain inconsistencies of layout, referencing, footnoting and occasional repetition as a matter of course. A number of pieces have been directly scanned from the published versions. On the positive side, catching a glimpse of certain texts’ actual appearance in print may serve as a reminder of the materiality of writing, including that of published works. Notwithstanding the inescapable presence of laptops and other means for the electronic manipulation of text, much of my writing has been executed by hand, by manual and electronic typewriters, and on word processors of almost medieval provenance. It has often, too, appeared in small, marginal journals whose rough and ready production values were an inherent feature of their critical stance.

Peter Suchin
February 2014

Note on scanned-in items
With the exception of the five items listed below, the places and dates of publication have been given with each text and, within the different sections of the booklet, approximate chronological order of publication has been maintained. The source information for scanned-in items is as follows:

“Blend and Clash: Theories of Discretion”, Variant, No. 7, Winter 1989
“The Treasure of the Perplexed: Ignorance as “Bliss” in Fine Art Education”, Art Monthly, No. 98, July/August 1986
“Merz Lexicon”, Wolfgang Fetz/Peter Lewis (Eds.), Merz=, Bregenz Kunstverein, Bregenz, Austria, 2006
“Notes from the Black Box”, Leigh Clarke (Ed.), No Letters, Lokaal 01, Netherlands, 2008
Section 1: Autobiographical
BLEND and CLASH: Theories Of Discretion

Peter Suchin

"Biologic Painting" Peter Suchin, 24"x24"
Acrylic on chipboard

The following grouping of sixty-five quotations was initially assembled as part of the material for an exhibition of both visual and written works which I held at Leeds Polytechnic Gallery, December 1988 - January 1989 under the title 'Theories of Discretion' Paintings, Collages and Texts.

The exhibition comprised of some forty abstract paintings and collages, a number of (previously published) writings on various aspects of art practice and theory, and the quotations themselves - the latter took up but a miniscule amount of the available wall space yet were, for me at least, a most important part of the presentation. Their importance related not so much to the particular meaning or meanings 'embedded' in each separate cluster of words - though these meanings were significant - but to the very fact of their presentation within, and as part of the space of what could very easily have been seen as a certain type of exhibition of a certain type of work. It was my intention to attempt to problematise the reading of the show and of each of its individual components, not out of any 'simple' irritability or (Douglas Kristeva) awkwardness vis-a-vis the contemporary conventions of the showing of works of art, and not out of any kind of homage - honourable or otherwise - to that particular mode of art world more which appears to include, as a kind of fashion item, some snippet of the ostensibly radical, the ostensibly subversive. It was rather because prior to this (my first) exhibition I had already experienced a particular kind of reaction to the paintings I had shown various friends and associates, a reaction which I did not feel was entirely pertinent to the objects I had made, nor to a whole range of objects which are often and uniformly framed by the conventional desription 'abstract art'.

Quotation number 34 below, a remark from Brian Eno, is to the point: "One of the problems with art forms is that each
one carries the notion with it of how it should be received.’
The reaction I refer to above was of the order of a reduction in meaning, a closure of interpretation. The appearance of the paintings - which I do not think needs to be described here - encouraged, as it still does, their consignment to a particular field of work, facilitating their placing amongst one set of discourses rather than another. I am trying to point to the fact that it is in effect incorrect to automatically associate what something looks like with what it actually is (see Art & Language ‘Peinture’. V. I. Lenin, Art-Language Volume 4, Number 4, June 1980 for an account of some of the problems involved in relating the look of a given image with its actual genesis). Things are placed within particular frameworks sometimes willy-nilly, meanings and values are ascribed through an already existent discourse, an invisible set of manners of reading. A much more direct way of saying all this might be to say that changing the text which accompanies a work or other object changes its meaning, and this is also to suggest that the way things get their meaning, and that meaning itself, is arbitrary. In Capitalist society there exists an extremely powerful and efficient set of technologies and distribution networks which cohere to allow for the quite subtle control of interpretation or, if you prefer, opinion. Within the more specific area of the art world there are similarly effective and efficient arbiters of taste and value. It is perhaps a truism to claim that it is critics and theorists (and not artists, as a rule) who place, through writings, lectures, television programmes and other media, an interpretation with a work, a theory with a practice. Yet truism or not it does appear that within art schools and indeed within the wider community of the art world, old, nonsensical ideas about the purity of ‘visual language’ and fantasies of unrestrained, untainted self-expression have not been too greatly disturbed by the influx into Britain of more recent developments from France - of the relations involved in the construction of the subject. To be any kind of artist still too often raises the idea that one cannot therefore be any kind of intellectual also. The exceptional accounts are usually afforded to artists working in the newer media of video, performance or related practices - painting, however, is tainted with an ideology of ‘expression’ and the criticising of this ideology is of necessity an intellectual task.

The actual quotations in my exhibition were taken from a larger collection which I have been assembling over the last few years. Whilst I want to emphasise the diverse and even contradictory implications of the material included, particularly when placed together in the format reproduced here, I do not want to deny that some tendencies of intention, of particular approaches to the readings of ‘works of art’ have been emphasised over others. Nevertheless it is intended that some openness of approach is maintained, if not positively encouraged by the structure of the juxtaposition of the various passages and remarks which are, it is hoped, ‘set in motion by the shock of their unevenness...it by each other’s reflections virtually like a trail of flashes on precious stones’ (Stéphane Mallarmé, The Poems, Penguin, 1977, p. 45).

In closing these notes I would like to make reference to what is by now a fairly common sensibility within so-called Postmodern culture, that is the widespread deployment of quotations and detailed references within novel works across a wide range of media. I have made a point of stressing my sources but, pace Barthes’ seminal essay ‘The Death of the Author’ it is possible to read the sixty-five quotations as being themselves accumulations of other quotations: ‘We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.’ (Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text, Fontana, 1977, p. 146). I would also like to draw the reader’s attention to Walter Benjamin’s idea of assembling a text entirely from extracts from other sources, a proposition discussed in Hannah Arendt’s introduction to Benjamin’s Illuminations (Fontana, 1973, p. 48 and following).

1. ‘...however strong historically the tendency towards a recurrence of pleasure may be, pleasure remains infantile when it asserts itself directly and without mediation. Art, absorbs pleasure as remembrance and longing; it does not copy it, does not seek to produce pleasure as an immediate effect.’
   - Theodor Adorno.

2. ‘...ephrastic language (the language produced and spread under the protection of power) is statutorily a language of repetition; all official Institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology...The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition: content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions - these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied: always new books, new programs, new films, new items, but always the same meaning...’
   - Roland Barthes.

3. ‘...who says there is more thought in labour than in enjoyment?’
   - Gilles Deleuze.

4. ‘In a society lacking stability, lacking unity, it is not possible to create stable definite art.’
   - Stéphane Mallarmé.

5. ‘The utopia anticipated by artistic form is the idea that things at long last ought to come into their own.’
   - Theodor Adorno.

6. ‘...a theory based on anachronistic ideological ground cannot have a progressive effect.’
   - Marcelin Pleynet.

7. ‘The artist has no morals, but he has a morality. In his work, there are these questions: What are others for me? How am I to desire them? How am I to lend myself to their desire? How am I to behave...’
   - Jean Baudrillard.
among them?—
- Roland Barthes.

8. ‘...one can look to the dependence of the painter as ‘subject’ on the history that constitutes his (biography) or the historical reality within which this history is constituted (for example, the constitution of a ‘subject’ within the totality of a social practice: the class struggle), and so on.’—
- Marcelin Pleynet.

9. ‘The problem is how to preserve art and how to destroy art in the process.’
- Hans Hess.

10. ‘The reduction of reading to a consumption is clearly responsible for the “boredom” experienced by many in the face of the modern (“unreadable”) text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, set it going.’
- Roland Barthes.

11. ‘The real political task today, at least in so far as it is also concerned with the cultural...is to carry forward the resistance that writing offers to established thought, to what has already been done, to what everyone thinks, to what is well-known, to what is widely recognized, to what is “readable”; to everything which can change its form and make itself acceptable to opinion in general. The latter...always works with what is taken for granted and with what is forgotten as such - for it grants no place to anamnesis. It is prejudiced. ‘Culture’ consists, as ‘activity’ and ‘animation’, in introducing all that into the order of writing, in the wide sense, into literature, painting, architecture and so on...I think that we have to resist...I can take...the artists and writers whom I hold to be...in their various ways, models of resistance (they may hate to be so described but that is quite another problem). Perhaps they lock themselves away, apart from everyone, unknown to the general public; I would say that in one sense that does not matter, for they do not owe this resistance to the community directly but to thought. Whether it is in a century or in six months that the community realizes the necessity of what they have done is another question. Their essential task is above all to write, to paint, and so on, and to do this here and now in response (and responsibility) to that question: what is writing, painting?’
- Jean-François Lyotard.

12. ‘As society congeals into a system of total interdependence, those works of art which store up the experience of this totalizing process become the antithetical other of society. Using the term ‘abstract’ in its loosest sense for a moment, we can say that abstractness in art signals a withdrawal from the objective world at a time when nothing remains of that world save its caput mortuum.’
- Theodor Adorno.

13. ‘The language I speak within myself is not of my time; it is prey, by nature, to ideological suspicion; thus, it is with this language that I must struggle. I write because I do not want the words I find...’
- Roland Barthes.

14. ‘Revolutionary practice, on whatever scale it takes, is a polyphonic practice: a vast syncretism of behaviours, discourses, symbols, actions, determinations - a pluralist activity...we must learn to consider the intellectual’s role. He is not a proxy. He doesn’t speak in the name of the proletariat: he must speak in his own name, in a revolutionary perspective, to account for what he needs, what hinders his intellectual activities, the alienations imposed upon him as an intellectual by our present society. He will be all the more a revolutionary if he measures the extent of his own alienation, and not just that of others.’
- Roland Barthes.

15. ‘It remains the case...that no theory...however comprehensive, can be constructed from intuitions alone, fine as they may be. Theory demands first of all the working through of a problematic in the painter’s practice in order to produce a real ‘revolution’...It has always been the case that the painter, the artist, considers the specificity of painting (if he considers it at all) as autonomous...In order to outline a theory he must engage in a relation with literary language. He thus has to take into consideration the autonomy of the language he uses, the history of that language, and more precisely still the historical itinerary of the concepts (philosophical, for instance) that he is led to use. That is to say, he must contemplate his own discipline, painting, no longer in its specific autonomy but rather in it’s differential specificity (a specificity whose reality is equally constituted by what differentiates it from other disciplines and by the relation that it maintains with these differences).’
- Marcelin Pleynet.

16. ‘The dialogue must remain an inexpungable accompaniment of human life.’

17. ‘In a false world all hedonism is false. This goes for artistic pleasure, too. Art renounces happiness for the sake of happiness, thus enabling desire to survive in art.’
- Theodor Adorno.

18. ‘I don’t like party lines. They make for intellectual monotony and bad prose...There are many intellectual tasks, and different levels of discourse. If there is a question of appropriateness, it is not because some events or works of art are more ‘reasonable’ targets, but because people who reason in public have - and ought to exercise - options about how many and how complex are the points they want to make. And where, in what form, and to what audience they make them.’
- Susan Sontag.
19. 'One class of...shapes might readily be imagined as dwellings...Another class as weapons. Another as modes of landscapes. Etc. etc. So here I know how I can ascribe meaning to a meaningless shape.'
   - Ludwig Wittgenstein.

20. 'In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an "ideal" receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.'
   - Walter Benjamin.

21. 'It is not up to the artist to reinstate a make-believe "reality" which the drive toward knowledge, technology, and wealth will continually destroy in order to replace it with a version more viable and which itself will eventually be replaced.'
   - Jean-Francois Lyotard.

22. 'The painting teaches the artist as much as the artist teaches the painting.'
   - Hans Hess.

23. 'The manner in which art communicates with the outside world is in fact also a lack of communication, because art seeks, blissfully or unhappily, to seclude itself from the world.'
   - Theodor Adorno.

24. 'There should be a critical movement that both deflates seemingly important objects and shows how people make sense from nothing.'
   - Roland Barthes.

25. 'The object of art - like every other product - creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.'
   - Karl Marx.

26. 'The very classification 'amateur' has an apologizing ring. But that very word - from the Latin 'amateur' - 'lover' means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity.'
   - M. Den R. Der.

27. 'To write is to permit others to conclude one's own discourse, and writing is only a proposition whose answer one never knows. One writes in order to be loved, one is read without being able to be loved, it is doubtless this distance which constitutes the writer.'
   - Roland Barthes.

28. '...it is the question of the persona; who am I? How do I appear to others?'
   - Hans Hess.

29. 'Everything has a meaning...Meaning is so fated for mankind that art (as liberty) seems to be used, especially today, not for making sense, but on the contrary for keeping it in suspense; for constructing meanings, but without filling them in exactly.'
   - Roland Barthes.

30. '...we still have to realize that we've been witnessing a permanent process of reformation in the individual's ability to see and then to love what he sees. But that's not at all the situation to be found in the majority of the works that are being produced today. They don't teach me anything. I say to myself, "I've already seen that, and I've already seen it done better." The ever emphasis of the hand, the agitated drawing, and all the rest of it, we already know that and we've already seen it. I'm not saying that it's entirely without interest, I'm just saying that it's without any interest for me.'
   - Jean-Francois Lyotard.

31. '...when the scene is over and the picture gone, we remember we are no longer the same as we were before.'
   - Roland Barthes.

32. 'If I were a painter, I should paint only colors: this field seems to me freed of both the Law (no imitation, no Analogy) and Nature (for after all, do not all the colors in Nature come from the painters)'
   - Roland Barthes.

33. 'Art, if it is to keep its distance from entertainment, requires a philosophical component. This remark should not be taken to mean that artists should cease making the sensual objects, taking up instead the philosopher's pen. The making of art should be an inherently critical activity. Art's critical function is apparent when it challenges the hegemony of that which has been rendered "natural" in our culture by the eyes of Science.'
   - Peter Suchin.

34. 'One of the problems with art forms is that each one carries the notion with it of how it should be received.'
   - Brian Eno.

35. 'I believe, in effect, that all fine sentences are endowed with an inalienable right which renders them untransferrable to any acquisitor other than the one whom they have been awaiting and for whom they are destined by fate.'
   - Marcel Proust.

36. 'It is only rising barbarism that limits works of art to what meets the eye...'
   - Theodor Adorno.
37. ". . . he paints because he wants to find out who he is; he paints because he is curious to know what comes next." - Hans Hess.

38. "My word remains in the continuing dialogue, where it will be heard, answered and reinterpreted." - Mikhail Bakhtin.

39. "Authenticity seems to me to be the problem." - Terry Atkinson.

40. "The element repressed from the history of painting (color) thus appeals here as determining the very possibility of painting...through the transformational mediation of theory." - Marcelin Pleynet.

41. "In the last instance...any attempt at explanation of a successful painting will leave some form of remainder. If that were not the case we should have no need of paintings. It is certainly the case, however, that the misrepresentations of works of art in history and criticism can impose a kind of screen between work and viewer." - Charles Harrison and Fred Orton.

42. "Art's essence is twofold: on the one hand, it dissociates itself from empirical reality and from the functional complex that is society; and on the other, it belongs to that reality and to that social complex." - Theodor Adorno.

43. "Interpretation reveals its complexity when we realise that a new force can only appear and appropriate an object by first of all putting on the mask of the forces which are already in possession of the object." - Gilles Deleuze.

44. "Meaning sticks to man: even when he wants to create non-meaning or extra-meaning, he ends by producing the very meaning of non-meaning or extra-meaning. It is all the more legitimate to keep returning to the question of meaning, in that it is precisely this question which impedes the universality of painting. If so many men (because of cultural differences) have the impression of "understanding nothing" in front of a canvas, it is because they want meaning and because the canvas (they think) does not give it to them." - Roland Barthes.

45. ". . . devotion to the text means the constant effort to grasp that which it hides." - Theodor Adorno.

46. "Let's say that modern art insists upon the individual as fragmented, wandering, at loose ends, as one who cannot find himself in the mirror of any ideology." - Julia Kristeva.

47. "Art is like a plenipotentiary of a type of praxis that is better than the prevailing praxis of society, dominated as it is by brutal self-interest." - Theodor Adorno.

48. "Society today has no use for art and its responses to it are pathological. In this society, art survives as reified cultural heritage and as a source of pleasure for the box-office customer, but ceases to have relevance as an object." - Theodor Adorno.

49. "Works of art...are identifiable as such simply because... social processes ...have fixed onto them the label "art"." - Roger Taylor.

50. "...those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere..." - Roland Barthes.

51. "The person has departed, having spoken his word, but the word itself remains in the open-ended dialogue." - Mikhail Bakhtin.

52. "Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken." - Theodor Adorno.

53. "The only relation to art that can be sanctioned in a reality that stands under the constant threat of catastrophe is one that treats works of art with the same deadly seriousness that characterizes the world today." - Theodor Adorno.

54. "...the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." - Marcel Duchamp.

55. "...the works of art which accumulate as the remnants of his despair." - Hans Hess.


57. "One could hardly find a better definition of the theoretical project - the inscription of a practice in the theoretical space that alone can actualize it." - Marceline Pleynt.

58. "Public opinion does not like the language of intellectuals. Hence he has often been dismissed by an accusation of intellectualist jargon. And hence he felt himself to be the object of a kind of racism: they excluded his language, i.e. his body: "you don't talk the way i do, so I exclude you."" - Roland Barthes.
60. "It may be more correct to say that all art is sad than it is tragic. This goes especially for art that thinks it is gay and harmonious." - Theodor Adorno

61. "...It is possible to enjoy the codes even while nostalgically imagining that someday they will be abolished: like an intermittent outsider, I can enter into or emerge from the burdensome sociality, depending on my mood - of insertion or of distance." - Roland Barthes

62. "...exhibitions... are stage-managed by the media... and thus popular viewing is not "popular"... No matter how many people visit galleries painting cannot enter into any relationship with its audience because its function has already been prescribed by society. The audience is only expected to look not think; the best painting can achieve in such a situation is an expressive not a cognitive function." - R.N. Wynn

63. "The most rudimentary behaviour must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which is trying to bring into being. This is what we call the project." - Jean-Paul Sartre

64. "Our civilization... is a civilization of words, despite the invasion of images." - Roland Barthes

65. "And who could write better than a painter?" - Roland Barthes

The quotations, numbered for reference, are taken from the following sources:

8. Painting and System, p.82.
On Meaning Not to Mean

The title of this exhibition is intended to construct a kind of model. This model or framework is proposed as open rather than closed, plural rather than singular, the title emphasising by its very ambiguity the possibility of multiple readings of the works on show rather than the consumption of a closed set of clearly legible perceptions. The production of plurality-inducing work can be seen as a political, critical activity if one holds the view that the hierarchical relations of capitalist society are in large part maintained through careful ruling class manipulation of the instruments and institutions of mass communication. It is a question of controlling information, of delimiting the range of readings which enter into general circulation. As Roland Barthes suggests in The Pleasure of the Text (Hill & Wang, 1975, pp. 40-42):

encratic language (the language produced and spread under the protection of power) is statutorily a language of repetition; all official institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology...The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition: content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions - these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied: always new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning.

This reading of mass culture is compatible with other critical models of consumer society, for one example Adorno and Horkheimer's articulation of what they call the "culture industry" (Dialectic of Enlightenment, Verso, 1979), and, for another, Jean-Francois Lyotard's proposition that "photographic and cinematic processes can accomplish better, faster, and with a circulation a hundred thousand times larger than pictorial or narrative realism, the task which academicism had assigned to realism: to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt." (The Postmodern Condition, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 74).

Capitalist society employs the model of realism to formulate and reinforce a "truth", that of a culture of consumption, a managerial culture, one which attempts to reduce everything to the status of a commodity offering no remainder beyond its intended, very limited purview. To unfix prescribed meanings, to try to make a space for interpretations that are not given in advance (not least with regard to the serious play of abstract painting) is a difficult critical task, the work of which cannot be carried by the work of art itself so much as by the discussions, arguments and anxieties such a device may generate. Such a position places a responsibility upon the viewer which is not that of a simple and as it were impersonal consumption.

In S/Z (Hill & Wang, 1974, pp. 5-6) Barthes describes what he calls the "writerly text":
the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system...which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages...Let us...posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many
and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a
galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds...we gain access to it by several
entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the
codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable...it is a
question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is
not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible.

The paintings I have contributed to the present exhibition are intended to align themselves
with this model.

**Lexical Vessels**
Peter Suchin (Ed.), "Located"/"Lexical Vessels", Globe Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1997

There are artists who write and writers who make works. Art is not just a practice but
a practical theory. While writing remains reflexive and understands implicitly the
contextual status of art and its conditions of possibility.

Since I subscribe to the view that the visual artwork inhabits a context largely determined by
theoretical positions (whether recognised as such or not) I have tended to concern myself
with the language in and around the work of art as much as with the visual object itself. My
work thus has two interrelated aspects. On the one hand I have attempted to analyse certain
components of the linguistic and institutional frameworks of art by producing a body of
critical writings; on the other, in my practice as a painter, I have been directly concerned with
the sensuous and as it were implicit features of the medium of painting itself. These two
facets of practice are related in a recursive, dialogical manner, not only to each other but
with respect to the wider culture that is the legacy of Modernism. As a part of this
complicated field of exchanges one may consider the paintings as implicitly philosophical,
whilst the theoretical writings are, inevitably, a kind of practice.

The paintings in the present exhibition comprise a limited and thereby selective
"retrospective" of my visual work to date. Technically they are, for the most part, small
abstract images executed in acrylic on board. Each painting is the result of a long process of
the redefinition of the structure, colour and general ambience or "timbre" of the work. Neither
this way of making work nor its results are intended to be didactic in any direct sense of the
term. Nor should the paintings be considered to be expressive compressions of an inner
motivation or mood. The work's "meaning" is not inscribed in advance of each painting's
actual fabrication and display. Their existence does not constitute the revelation of an
"authentic" truth.

My method of making the paintings might be termed "heuristic" because it is in one sense
fairly open-ended. [1] Results stem not from the transmission of a schema, nor from the
 copying of a sketch or plan but from a "dialogue" between myself as producer of the work in
 front of me and the actual painted surface. In this connection it is apposite to cite two
remarks from Hans Hess' *Pictures as Arguments*. Hess suggests that "The painting teaches
the artist as much as the artist teaches the painting", and also that the artist "paints because
he wants to find out who he is; he paints because he is curious to know what comes next." [2] These claims raise the matter of practice as involves moving beyond a mere clutch of behavioural rules. They positively imply a model of the self that is compatible with those theories of the human subject generated by writers such as Barthes, Kristeva, Foucault and Lacan. Such a subject is mobile, in flux, is what Kristeva calls a "subject in process". "Let's say", comments Kristeva, "that modern art insists upon the individual as fragmented, wandering, at loose ends, as one who cannot find himself in the mirror of any ideology." [3]

Hans-Georg Gadamer has also pointed out that the work of art can be a dialogic object for its producer as well as for others. In his essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful" he proposes that:

Someone who has produced a work of art stands before the creation of his hands in just the same way that anyone else does. There is a leap between the planning and the executing on the one hand and the successful achievement on the other. The thing now "stands" and thereby is "there" once and for all, ready to be encountered by anyone who meets it and to be perceived in its own "quality". [4]

Returning to the theme of the dialectic of image and text, it appears that the nature of the relationship between painting and writing is something that will never find a final resolution. Peter Seddon has noted that "The fact of a long relationship between visual and written orders of representation does not imply any sort of easy harmony between the two, or an ability to translate easily from one to the other." [5] Paintings and texts are objects which are subject to quite distinct laws of production and reception, yet neither field of operation is so strictly bound to escape the intense (if subtle and discreet) effects of the other. Nevertheless, in the present context the emphasis falls upon my painterly practice. It has been my intention to make visual work that is at one and the same time sensuous and intelligent, paintings which, whilst being of necessity coloured by linguistic constraints are simultaneously reflexive within the terms of painting itself. I am thus focusing upon the particularities of painting whilst keeping in mind the complexities of critical theory.

It is of course ultimately incorrect to discuss theory and practice as though they actually could be split off from one another and placed each in their own unrelated frame. As Goethe observed, I think correctly: "There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory. [6] This "empiricism" is, for me, the practice of painting.

Notes

1. A work I completed in 1981 is entitled "Heuristic Painting". I have discussed the relationship of text to image as regards my own work in an earlier publication, "Blend and Clash: Theories of Discretion", Variant, No. 7, Winter 1989. For a reading offering a somewhat different account of my visual work see Paul Crowther, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 203 - 206 and p. 209.


A Note on The Grey Planets
Peter Suchin et al, Four Exhibitions, Highland Institute of Contemporary Art, Loch Ruthven, Scotland, 2009

For my exhibition The Grey Planets, held at HICA in October 2008, I assembled what was in effect a mini-retrospective of my paintings to date. The one exception in this display of a dozen works, and the earliest piece in the show, was a collage, more or less in the manner of Kurt Schwitters, made when I was seventeen years old, entitled (referencing William Burroughs) The Ticket That Imploded (1977). Everything else was a painting. The most recent works shown were three that had not previously been exhibited, Non-Location, Jealous Striation and Theatrical Conceit, all of which were completed in 2006. There was a fourth painting that had not been publicly exhibited, In Castorp’s Castle (2001), though it had been sold, being loaned by its owner for the duration of the show.

As the formal gallery space at HICA is not very large (and not being aware, when I planned the exhibition, that other parts of the building might also be employed), I chose to send only small-scale works to HICA. The most compact of these was the paradoxically titled Miniaturisation is the Next Big Thing (2005), measuring only 6cm x 6cm, though its frame acted to increased its scale. Placing such “condensed” paintings in a gallery located in the Scottish Highlands had, for me, an amusing aspect since the contrast between the vastness of the mountainous landscape and the very small works was acute. Whilst none of the paintings are representational in the usual sense of that term, some of them do have connotations of landscape, a feature which is often emphasised by their titles. A good example of this is In Castorp’s Castle, which was given that designation partly because its owner has a particular interest in Thomas Mann’s novel The Magic Mountain (1924). In this work the central protagonist, Hans Castorp travels to a sanatorium located atop a mountain in the Swiss Alps in order to visit his cousin who is recuperating there. Although Castorp intends to stay for only a short time, he himself develops, during his visit, a terminal illness. The rest-home and hospital is in a sense a kind of fortress, castle or prison and it was partly with this idea in mind that I came up with the title. In Castorp’s Castle includes a mountain or volcano-shaped area of paint, as well as marks that might be read as drifting clouds or an otherwise volatile sky, and one way of thinking about the painting is as an imaginary panorama, as seen from inside the “castle”, a view through a window, perhaps, onto the valley below.

The title also indirectly points to Roland Barthes, who spent some time in a sanatorium as a young man and who had a particular interest in The Magic Mountain.

Several of the works in The Grey Planets had their titles indented or finalised whilst Geoff Lucas and myself were installing the show – this included paintings that were physically complete in all respects save the title, which I regard as an important part of each work. To call something “untitled” seems indolent, as well as a missed opportunity in terms of possibly expanding the work’s potential through the attaching of a carefully chosen linguistic component. Whilst I would maintain that these paintings are abstract or non-figurative, or, to
use another related term, “concrete”, human beings are animals of language and the “language instinct”, to use Steven Pinker’s expression (see his book of that title, 1994) is not something one can ignore.

The way these paintings are produced ties in well, I think, with certain aspects of “concrete” art, which is perhaps the main aesthetic and philosophical interest supported by HICA, and which helps to define its particularity as an exhibition space. This concern with what I take to be – in one consideration of the label “concrete” – a focusing-in on the materiality of works of art is why I was keen to show at the space. When starting a new painting the board or canvas I use is painted over with any colour that’s to hand. Other layers are applied, “random” shapes are marked out, the surface is extensively reworked and reordered, often over a time scale of several years. Acrylic paint is employed, a medium which dries quickly, allowing numerous layers of paint to be applied in a single day. I do not base the marks or shapes I make on actual objects, entities or places. The painting is almost entirely generated through the complicated and time-consuming manipulation of a composition that comes out of working the painting’s surface. Neither drawings, nor photographs, nor any other mnemonic devices are used in the production of the work. Wherein, as previously mentioned, certain paintings, or parts of paintings, “look like” a landscape or seem to be a translation of some actually extant object or place, this is never in fact the case.

In other words, the work is generated out of what one might cautiously call a “dialogue” between myself and the painted surface. It is an open-ended process, there is no attempt to capture or record a specific mood or sense of something already “out there” in the world. The work is “concrete” through and through, because it is entirely a material thing.

In this way, one might claim that the paintings refuse many of the ideologies of Modernist (including “abstract”) art, even if, superficially, their appearance is sometimes akin to previously experienced abstract works. What my practice implicitly rejects are ideas of the “spiritual” and also of “expression”. The emphasis upon the “concrete-ness” of the working process is extremely important, but it is not a matter of unearthing any kind of “essence” there either, such as that of paint itself (supposing there was such a thing apart from in a merely technical sense), or even of the act of paint application. It is not a question of the gesture of the artist. Notions of essences are invariably misleading. By stating that the works have a predominantly concrete sense about them I mean that they are, on one level, nothing other than this, nothing other, that is, than a certain accumulation of choices, actions, received or invented techniques and ideas. I think of them more as actualised propositions for paintings, than as expressive devices. They are not transmitters of preconceived meaning; the meanings they make manifest and accrue through time are the result of their emphatically material, concrete form and the (entirely secular) procedures at my disposal.

Notes on Notes
Peter Suchin, Index, Scribble, Snapshot, Tract, Kaleid Editions, 2009

“I’ve got to write it down, and it won’t be forgotten…”
David Bowie [1]

“There will be several books in this book…” Jacques Derrida
This publication presents ten close copies of index cards from a still expanding archive of 3000-4000 A5 cards of a kind that I have been using for almost two decades. Produced in France, they are there called *fiches*. [2] At the present time (October 2009) the used cards are stored in a number of plastic, cardboard, and metal containers in no particular order save that which has come about through the vagaries of their occasional consultation, and the much rarer instances of their public display.

Although the inscribed fiches were never intended as public material, Peter Lewis, on offering me an exhibition at his London project space, Redux, in 2003, suggested I include in the show a small number of the cards. After some consideration I decided to fill the largest wall of the space with them, displaying 718 fiches in all.

The resulting exhibition was entitled *Museum of the Vexed Text*, a phrase I have deployed for all subsequent showings of the cards. [3] In the summer of 2006 a smaller selection of cards was included in the group show *Merz=*, in Bregenz, Austria, for which I wrote the following statement:

*Museum of the Vexed Text* is an extract from an archive of several thousand filing cards used by Peter Suchin over the past 20 years. The cards contain a wide range of jottings, scribbles, doodles and diagrams, including quotations from friends and acquaintances, lists of things to do, spontaneous remarks, puns, title-suggestions, ‘phone numbers, diary entries, citations from the radio, mnemonics, lecture prompts, anagrams, and extracts from books. Such notes are, in short, the variegated traces of an idiosyncratic (if quotidian) practice of writing.

The present selection is of French index cards or *fiches*, first utilised by Suchin in 1990, and chosen for their practicality as well as their aesthetic appeal. They replace the smaller cards he used in the 1980s, as well as notebooks first employed in the 1970s. Initially folded for portability and ease of writing, in the majority of cases both sides of the cards have been marked. The preferred medium is ink (especially Biro), since pencil and other such materials are all too easily smudged or erased.

In the present exhibition the fiches are arranged in a relatively random order. Although each card is dated, the continuity of their production is interrupted, dislocated rather than reinforced. [4]

With respect to the title of the present publication, *Index* refers to methods of storage, classification and retrieval, whilst also suggesting the act of pointing to or singling out. *Scribble* indicates the track and form of a frantic writing, as well as the production of marks void of intended meaning, a kind of doodling or “squandering”, to borrow a term from Roland Barthes. [5] I have utilised the term *Snapshot* as that is all that a mere ten cards from a cache of several thousand fiches can provide in terms of an image of this practice as a whole. Individual details from the cards, both textual and visual, insofar as these can be separated, occasionally trigger memories of the time and place where a given note was made or a diagram drawn, like a photographic snapshot. As for *Tract*, the word conjures up the notion of a conduit or channel of communication, but also acts as a synonym for “argument” or “dissertation”. Rather than being merely an accumulation of discrete snippets, isolated areas of the cards – or indeed, by extension, whole cards – may be perceived as
the miniscule components of an extensive but interlocking mosaic, a somewhat irregular but Nonetheless serious and persistent autobiographical discourse.

I first began consciously, and in a sense conspicuously jotting things down in 1976, at that time in notebooks, whilst my friend JD, who was certainly an influence in this matter of perpetual writing, simply employed whatever paper came to hand. [6] I had, however, previously kept, beginning around 1972, detailed diaries in notebooks or on loose sheets. During a long stay in Paris in 1980 JD started to use French index cards for his notes. These plain white cards measured 10.5 x 15cm, but he also wrote on the larger A5 cards (21 x 15cm), the same size as those I use today. It wasn't until 1983 that I myself took to writing on the smaller fiches (mainly the coloured, gridded variety), eventually deciding upon cards twice this size.

Whilst JD mixed everything together in terms of his textual juxtapositions, putting notes from books he was reading on the same sheet as more casual, “undirected” remarks, in my own case I mainly used fiches for the spontaneous recording of ideas, amusing or interesting remarks, titles for paintings, lists of jobs to do or appointments to meet and such like, and not for the more orderly and systematic note-taking conventionally associated with serious reading or writing. To this day, the notes I take when reading books or in preparation for the writing of an article or review are made on consecutively numbered sheets of lined A4 paper or, now and then, in notebooks reserved for that express purpose. I only use the fiches for notes from books when nothing else is to hand, or because convenient when in a confined space such as on the tube or train. Michael Hampton, in his contribution to the present publication, points out the two extreme points, as it were, of my card annotations: on the one hand, this drawing-writing is an entirely gratuitous activity; on the other, one may consider at least some of what is on the cards as a kind of ongoing amateur anthropological survey, though one lacking, admittedly, a consistent methodology. [7]

The Ten Cards

“Look closely at this card, it’s a reproduction.” Jacques Derrida [8]

Notes or drawings made on a given date are marked off from other areas of the card, so it is always possible to tell, unless an error has been made, when something was written down. An individual card may contain several days’ annotations or just that of a single date. The dates here used as headings indicate the earliest date to be found on the specific card being cited, with its colour being supplied for ease of reference. The descriptions are not exhaustive, but merely serve to indicate what kinds of things the cards contain.

1. Friday, 12 February, 1993 (white)
This card includes detailed notes about an exchange with Frances T; also, references to people I worked with and taught when living in the north of England. There’s also a rather pedestrian pun on the title “Book of Kells” (as “Book of Kills”).

2. Wednesday, 29 October, 1997 (pink)
There are references here to the novelist Paul Auster, and to the 1997 Royal Academy (London) exhibition Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection. One of the wordplays here, “Condensation”, was employed for the title of my review of the show, published in Everything, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998. On the other side of the card there is a long note recording a conversation with Jon Bewley, the director of the curatorial practice Locus+,
referring to an account he gave me of a visit to the Museum of Natural History in Oxford with
the artist Cornelia Hesse-Honegger. During the visit Bewley and Hesse-Honegger were
shown a wooden box containing part of a collection of insects that had been assembled by
Charles Darwin. This was a particularly pertinent thing to show Hesse-Honegger, as she
makes highly detailed watercolour paintings of insects that have suffered mutation as a
result of radioactive leakage from nuclear power stations. Darwin recorded natural genetic
transformations in animal life, whilst Hesse-Honegger’s work maps the mutations brought
about by a pernicious human technology. There are also a few notes here pertaining to my
contribution to a conference on art criticism, *Tower of Babble*, organised by Malcolm
Dickson, held at the CCA in Glasgow towards the end of 1997.

3. Thursday, 28 February, 2002 (white)
Here are notes documenting vulgar expressions used on the BBC’s Radio 4, as well as
relating to a wooden (and therefore rather unusual) telephone box located just inside the
entrance to the Royal Academy in Piccadilly, London. There are also several drawings.

4. Thursday, 18 July, 2002 (yellow)
Both sides of this card are taken up with diagrams by Steven Wong, for his project *Cinema
City*, a complex video installation on which I wrote an essay, published in the exhibition
catalogue for the 6th Sharjah International Biennial, edited by Hoor Al-Qasimi and Peter
Lewis, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2003.

5. Saturday, 1 May, 2004 (pink)
Inscribed on this card are quotations from Rikke H pertaining to allegory, one of which reads
“Allegory overwrites the original sites”. RH is also cited, though not by name, in section 12
(p. 39) of my text “Notes from the Black Box”, included in Leigh Clarke (Ed.), *No Letters*,
Lokaal 01, Netherlands, 2008. There is also an incomplete draft of a letter to Eva Weinmayr
and a list of eight of Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies*, from the boxed set of
cards first published under that title in 1975.

6. Friday, 14 January, 2005 (blue)
The mix of notes here includes recordings of the inanities utilised by people using mobile
phones in public places, as well as the idea that Biros may contain within them specific
pieces of prose, waiting, as it were, to be released into the world through the act of writing.
There are also lines about the word “replatformed”, a term used by the train guard during a
journey I made between London and Bristol on the day I wrote the note. Such deliberately
reductive and misleading language is typical of corporate culture. The guard was referring to
the train driver having been told that he should bring his vehicle into the station at a platform
different to the one he had originally been allocated. The notes I made whilst reading H J
Jackson’s *Marginalia* (Yale University Press, 2001) were crossed out after they had been
transferred to the body of notes I had been keeping specifically on this work.

7. Saturday, 23 April, 2005 (yellow)
More “stupidities” taken from the radio: “It didn’t market well with that day”; “The Bourbon
tastes like a mouthful of candlewax”; “I had to doorstep”; “I have to say” – what struck me
here was the apparently casual dropping-in of brand names (a practice it would seem is
practically obligatory on the BBC today), the unverifiability of the claims made, the
ridiculousness of the cliché “I have to say”, a phrase rendered more or less meaningless by
overuse. There are further examples of such language on the second side of the card.
8. Tuesday, 26 July, 2005 (green)
On the first side, a list of mundane chores: sending E-mails, buying train tickets. Overleaf is a rather economical map of Whitechapel, London, made by Matt Hale and myself en route to visit Pat Naldi, the street on which she lives being indicated by two vertical parallel lines.

9. Friday, 19 August, 2005 (blue)
Quotations from Radio 4 – the focus of my note-taking was upon idiotic assertions (“we go for a spin in a revolutionary new motorbike”; “a talk to your baby scenario”), product promotion, and yet more vapidity, “cool” being a prime example here. If proof was required to support George Orwell’s theory (in Nineteen Eighty-Four) that oppressive political systems encourage a reduction in vocabulary, and, concomitantly, subtlety of expression, the now-constant use of the word “cool” would be it. A somewhat laboured, crosshatched drawing also occupies this card.

10. Monday, 2 March, 2009 (green)
There is a diagram (by PS) of Mik G’s Nottingham flat, made, I think, when talking with Carol C, who has also drawn on this card. There’s a brief note about the maker of miniature sculptures Willard Smith and the phrase “Hysteria office”, about which I have no recollection at the present time.

Notes


2. The fiches are produced by the company Exacompta. I also write on English and Greek index cards but use these to a much lesser degree than the French cards.

3. Museum of the Vexed Text included, as well as the wall of cards, my painting “Tempered, Distended, Folded, Suspended” (2003) and also several “Pocket Paintings”, a reading table containing a number of my published texts, and my article “Reinvention without End: Roland Barthes” (from Mute No. 26, Summer/Autumn 2003) was mounted on the wall opposite the fiches. I used the term museum in order to suggest that the cards (at least) might be thought of as personal documents rather than “works of art”, though the fact that the fiches, when mounted on the wall, recalled artworks by Piet Mondrian, Art & Language and Sol LeWitt (amongst others) was not lost on me. At one end of the spectrum there was an emphasis on the materiality of the signifier in the form of “non-representational” paintings, at the other there was, with the meanings and arguments contained in the published texts, a foregrounding of signification and reference. The cards occupied the mid-point between these two extremes.

To date, the fiches have been exhibited at the following venues: Redux, London (Museum of the Vexed Text, 2003-2004); Hellenic American Union, Athens (Lost in Translation, 2004); Bregenz Kunstverein, Bregenz, Austria (Merz=, 2006); HICA, Lake Ruthven, Scotland (Concrete Now!, 2008). A card bearing the date Thursday, 28/9/2006 was sent to Baltimore in 2008, to be included in a travelling show entitled Penned, but did not arrive at its intended destination.

4. Included in Peter Lewis et al, Merz =, Bregenz, Austria, 2006, p. 100. The present version has been slightly revised.

5. Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 113. In the same book Barthes also describes doodling as “the signifier without the signified” (p. 187). Andrew Brown suggests that for Barthes “the truth of writing is elsewhere: not in the voiced name, the recognizable identity, but in a practice of writing that cannot be voiced – that is unpronounceable, like a scribble.” A related point is made by Jacques Derrida when he remarks: “Between writing with a pen or speaking on the telephone, what a difference”. (Jacques Derrida, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 31).

“To scribble”, Brown further observes, is “to write or draw in a hasty or illegible manner; to make meaningless or illegible marks; and, in derogatory or facetious contexts, to write in general – novels, poems, plays. The etymology of “scribble” is from the medieval Latin scribiliare, meaning to write hastily, from Latin scribere, to write. But there is another meaning too: to scribble can be to card (wool, for example). Its etymology in this case is probably from a Low German cognate of schrubben, which gives us the verb to scrub – to rub a surface hard in order to clean it; to remove dirt; and, in informal contexts, to delete or cancel.” See Andrew Brown, Roland Barthes The Figures of Writing, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 151-152.
6. JD, who I had known since 1972, disappeared on Monday, 1 December, 1986. His present whereabouts, where he went or what happened to him on that date remains a mystery.

7. The reference to anthropology in this context brings to mind Michel Leiris, who famously applied the note-taking skills he had developed during his time as an anthropologist to more personal ends, transcribing pages from his diaries onto index cards when assembling, later in life, his autobiographical reflections. Vladimir Nabokov used index cards for the manuscripts of several of his books, an approach echoed by the fictitious character John Shade in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, first published in 1962.

It has been argued that the vast cross-referenced index card-based information storage system devised by Paul Otlet in Belgium in the early years of the twentieth century is an important precursor of the Internet. See Paul Collins, “The house of cards”, *New Scientist*, 22 March, 2008. For a contemporary discussion of index cards see Oliver Burkeman, “Laugh all you like...index cards are pretty cool”, *The Guardian*, 9 May, 2009.


---

**A Sinuous Network : Introduction to a Private Library**


**Part One**

*Small rooms or dwellings discipline the mind, large ones weaken it.*

Leonardo da Vinci [1]

*Book-collecting is an intimate, almost secret, passion, with bibliophiles part of a secret fraternity that is both real and intangible. Some people are almost walking libraries in themselves.*

Roland Beaufre and Domnique Dupuich [2]

1. The library is currently housed in a modestly sized room on the fourth floor of an industrial estate in South London. There is a single door. No windows. One enters through a short, thin passageway that opens out into the larger of the two distinct areas into which the room is split.

2. This first space has books lining three of its sides, with, on the fourth wall, two long, high shelves that run above several large canvases placed against it. There are also, in the corner, ten or twelve smaller paintings, in various states of completion, leaning at ninety degrees to the larger canvases. The lower of the long shelves holds around 170 works of fiction; half a dozen boxes of used index cards, as well some pristine stationery and a few more books, entirely fill the one above it. [3] But the predominant feeling, irrespective of the other objects here, is one of being surrounded by books. A table and single chair take up rather too much of the rest of this space, given that one of its main functions is as an area in which to paint. [4]

3. An L-shaped arrangement of shelves right in the middle of the room, running almost floor to ceiling, acts both as a series of partitions and a way into the second space. Books and cardboard folders line three of the walls of this smaller chamber, whilst the fourth hosts a large wide shelf upon which rest a CD player, amplifier and numerous CDs. In this “inner sanctum” there’s just enough room for two people to sit.

4. As regards the entire library of some 6000 volumes, all of which are stored in this single room, about half of the collection is in cardboard boxes, many of which are stacked on top of
the bookshelves. Further boxes of books have been packed into an area close to the door, and are effectively hidden by the bookshelf-partitions.

5. There are a dozen free-standing shelving units of accessible works, not always of identical dimensions, but as the book-cases are mostly of a similar height one’s overall impression is of a well-ordered, if somewhat convoluted sequence of volumes, the whole room and its contents suggesting, to borrow a phrase from Alberto Manguel, "a spatial complexity that seems almost impossible in so restricted a space". The library is thus a sinuous network, a labyrinth within a labyrinth. [5]

6. For the most part the books are neatly aligned in the established manner at ninety degrees to the horizon line of the shelf, though a small number of volumes lie horizontally across other books, works relating to the subject next to, or within which they have been placed, positioned in this way simply because the volumes whose accessibility is desirable is in excess of the available storage area with respect to a given category or theme. “Ultimately”, as Manguel rightly remarks with respect to the private library, “the number of books always exceeds the space they are granted”. [6]

7. It has taken some eighteen months for the library to have reached this condition, to be arranged, that is, in such a way that a given book can be found within a few seconds or a minute or two if it is a work infrequently consulted. As Walter Benjamin observed with respect to his own library, “what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear an order?” [7] It was inevitable that, during the process of arrangement, decisions had to be taken as to what would be placed openly on the shelves and what would be stored away. Within the latter grouping the books remain largely inaccessible except through considerable effort, and since the boxes containing them carry no indication of their contents, nor is there any catalogue or map of where a particular work resides within the overall structure of the room, unearthing a specific book from these containers would be a difficult and time consuming task.

8. What is exposed, displayed, arranged for access in the library is thus a selection of works chosen through the criteria of their imagined “usage” during the period – the length of which at the present time cannot be determined – that the library – or as it may also be described, the archive – remains within the building of which this room, this studio, this secret and inaccessible chamber is but a small and insignificant part. [8]

**Part Two**

*There are no final categories in a library.*

Alberto Manguel [9]

*A private library, unlike a public one, presents the advantage of allowing a whimsical and highly personal classification…[These] may serve a singular, private purpose.*

Alberto Manguel

9. Archaeology lies close to true and fictitious criminality; Lewis Carroll and Christine Brooke-Rose stand by Doctor Johnson and a couple of books on guillotines and torture. Further down, it’s stamps and postal systems, and volumes on country houses. Then space and time, along from which are tricks, hoaxes, games and play. On the bottom shelf of this particular stack are works on the *Titanic* and on science and natural forms.
10. But this little part of the library is only half resolved, a recently erected octet of shelves on which also reside a number of works as yet not properly placed. Elsewhere there is greater coherence, though this may mask itself as incongruity to the untrained eye. In the large section on literary criticism and theory one will find Mikhail Bakhtin and Bernard Bergonzi, Jonathan Culler and William Empson, Paul de Man and Edward Said, Susan Sontag and George Steiner. There’s also a work on literary forgery by Nick Groom - should this be in the section on crime, or amongst games and hoaxes? [10] There are 51 or 52 books by and about Roland Barthes, 34 by or pertaining to Walter Benjamin, ten volumes of and around Theodor Adorno, works on the Frankfurt School generally, on Modernity and Postmodernity, the avant-garde, the decadent and the kitsch. [11]

11. Close by there are two completely jammed-full shelves of books on music, film and theatre, within which are seven books on Erik Satie and six on Glenn Gould. Then a whole shelf of works pertaining to the Oulipo: Calvino, Mathews, Perec, Roubaud, Queneau and others, and, right underneath this, a sequence of 43 volumes by and about Marcel Proust. This includes Julia Kristeva’s *Time and Sense*, though the rest of the Kristeva books are elsewhere next to Philippe Sollers and *Tel Quel*. That’s one of the questions about library classification that one has to consider: should all of a given author’s books be concurrently shelved or are there “special cases” wherein something that is, from a certain perspective, in the wrong place is, from a different point of view, exactly where it should be? Here Proust gets the precedent. Gilles Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs* has been similarly singled out for separation from the cluster of works by Deleuze to be placed amongst the Proust; but his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* is with his *Masochism, Bergsonism, Anti-Oedipus* and other works, not within that small corner of the library devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche, where, within another potential ordering, it could well be placed.

12. Below Proust there’s a large length of shelving devoted to the *Nouveau Roman*, both works by individual authors and books about them, as well as commentaries on the New Novel as a general force: Butor (6 volumes), Mauriac (3), Pinget (7) Robbe-Grillet (22 or 23), Sarraute (9), Simon (13). [12] Then there is another large scramble of works of literary theory, and a section on Charles Baudelaire. However, Benjamin’s *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* is placed amongst the works by WB. [13]

13. The books on education are just along from the Situationist International. I forget why I sandwiched in between them some Fredric Jameson – probably more because these works physically fitted there than due to some kind of neat alignment of content or approach. There are many sections of works on individual authors or artists apart from those already mentioned: Althusser, Aragon, Atkinson (Terry), Apollinaire, Art & Language, Austen, Bachelard, Bacon (the philosopher), Bataille, Boll, Breton, the Brontes, Burgess, Burroughs (William), Celine, Christie, Collins, Cornell, Derrida, Doctorow, Dostoevsky, Doyle, Duchamp, Eco, Eliot, Flaubert, Foucault, Fowles, Gide, Goethe, Greene, De Quincey, Freud, Home, Heidegger, Huysmans, James (Henry), James (P D), Jarry, Joyce, Johnson, Kafka, Lautreamont, Levi-Strauss, Kierkegaard, Klossowski, Leiris, Lyotard, Mallarme, Mann, Marx, Mottram, Nabokov, Nuttall, Plato, Poe, Price, Pynchon, Richter, Reich, Rilke, Rimbaud, Roussel, de Sade, Schwitters, Sennett, Sinclair (Iain), Smithson, Soane, Stendhal, “B Traven”, Verne, Warhol, Wilson (Colin), Wilson (Robert Anton), Wittgenstein, Woolf, Yates. This is not an exhaustive list.
14. The range of subjects or themes is equally extensive, again not including categories to which I have already referred: aesthetics, anagrams and word games, anthropology, art and architecture, art criticism, books about books and libraries, clubs and secret societies, codes and ciphers, Conceptual Art, Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, dictionaries and works of reference, espionage, food and drink, ghosts and hauntings, gardens, history, Jack the Ripper, linguistics, London, Marxism, money and economics, museums and collecting, the occult, philosophy, Psychoanalysis, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, sociology, secret chambers, sex and love, the 1960s, subterranea, UFOs, witchcraft, writing systems.

15. Many of the books on UFOs and on witchcraft are in boxes; certainly, the great majority of the former are not on the shelves. [14] The juxtapositions may seem rather strange when one notices that the volumes on London are shelved close to those on subterranea – the link here is that of the London Underground and of books specifically on, to deploy a title from one of them, *London under London*. [15] The books by and about Mallarme and Poe are shelved close to Derrida. Whilst the latter has written about the former literary figures there is no intrinsic determining factor in play here: Derrida and, incidentally, Wittgenstein are “philosophers” who have been allotted their own individual areas in the library, as opposed to being placed within “philosophy”; both seem to transcend the icy academicism of that label. Having decided to isolate these writers from the broader framework within which they are normally placed, it was a matter, when setting up the books, of finding sufficient shelf space for them. The block of Derrida material fills approximately half a shelf that is in total 76 centimetres wide, the remainder of this length neatly housing my Poe collection. The same approach – finding enough space to contain discrete gatherings of books on a single figure – has been used throughout. The shelf right under Derrida and Poe holds Mallarme, De Quincey and Roussel. This “open” system of positioning appears to work because the scale of the library is relatively small and one soon believes oneself familiar with its layout.

16. Some areas of the collection can be regarded as subsections of broader classifications – the works on Jack the Ripper, for example, are placed within the section on crime; they could, alternatively, be included with works on London, as might the books pertaining to Sherlock Holmes; or again, these latter might be regarded as finding, in another arrangement, their home on the shelves devoted to crime. The particular order of juxtapositions is largely arbitrary and “suited to oneself”. But the library nevertheless poses “shelf after shelf the question “Who am I?”” [16]

17. In the small section of books about food and drink (14 items) are to be found several works on coffee houses, one on picnics, and John Walton’s *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class*, 1870-1940. [17] The coffee house might well be “connectable” with books on clubs, and the single work on picnics could have ended up amongst the literature on gardens. Indeed, Aytoun Ellis’ *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee Houses* (Secker & Warburg, 1956) has some claim to be among works on education. Walton might well be amongst the history books, as also might John Burnett’s *Plenty and Want*. The two-volume *Visage de Therese de Lisieux*, with its incredible photographs of its eponymous subject, in particular the close-ups of her eyes, is shelved among works attending to Fortean and other unexplained phenomena. Most of the books on religion are not on the shelves, but the T of L material interests me more in connection with the inexplicable and the unusual than as an example of a tribute to a religious figure. Along with Charles Fort, John Michell and Alfred Watkins are, in this part of the library, volumes on secret rooms and esoteric spaces, so the placing of a work containing many photographs taken within the enclosed
world of the convent seems apt in that respect as well. If Huysmans didn’t have his own little conglomeration his Against Nature could be kept, because, of course, of his account of Des Esseintes’ totally enclosed house, next to Robert Harbison’s Eccentric Spaces – which is found amongst the books on secret chambers, right next to the section devoted to John Soane.

18. There is single small shelf mainly given over to books to which I have myself contributed.

Notes


3. I have published in a limited edition a boxed set of screenprinted copies of ten such cards. Initially intended to be in an edition of 150, due to the publisher’s failure to meet our agreement only some forty copies were printed. See Peter Suchin, Index, Scribble, Snapshot, Tract, Kaleid Editions, 2009.

4. This particular library is also a study for reading and writing and a studio for painting. On the history of the study and its links with the studio and the practice of collecting see Dora Thornton, The Scholar in His Study, Yale University Press, 1997. Thornton writes: “The study as a room-type lies at the heart of [Renaissance] culture, for it represents not only the celebration of the individual, but also the prestige of education, learning and the arts... In itself, however humble the room, the study demonstrated the dignity of an individual, for it was... set apart for the use of a single owner. More than any other room... the study was perceived... as having an individual owner, and a secret identity of its own, which might persist long after that owner’s death.” (p. 1) The specificity of the place in which one keeps one’s books is also discussed by Alberto Manguel in his The Library at Night, Yale University Press, 2008 – see especially the chapter headed “The Library as Shape”.

5. The Library at Night, p. 158. Eleanor Moreton has remarked on the size of the studio-library, and its contents. She writes: “…I am visiting Suchin’s tiny studio space in Bermondsey. There is no natural light. A ladder is propped up against one of the partitioning bookshelves; there are sections on Duchamp, Proust, and Literary Theory... I notice a book on John Dee’s occultism on the shelves and Musil’s The Man Without Qualities... Suchin searches for Fish and Chips and The British Working Class. What is the relationship between the eclectic library and the paintings?” Eleanor Moreton, “In the Borderlands of Language”, Garageland, No. 12, 2011, pp. 62-63.


8. With respect to the term “usage” as employed in this paragraph, it should be recalled that Benjamin was keen to point out that the determining factor with respect to building up a collection, including one of books, was decidedly not that of its utility. See his “Unpacking My Library”, cited above, note 7.

Towards the end of this paragraph the text becomes, perhaps, a little exaggerated. I am reminded, however, that some years ago, upon seeing my library for the first time, a visitor to my flat in Whitechapel suggested that a book I had deliberately left projecting from the shelf as a reminder that I consult it later was the key to the library. The work in question was Allan Fea’s Secret Chambers and Hiding-Places (3rd Edition, revised), 1908. This volume is presently shelved, appropriately, within the inner section of the library, amongst several other works on clandestine spaces. For 44 photographs of details of the library at its Whitechapel location see Peter Suchin, “Books”, /seconds, No. 8, 2007 (http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/article/psuchin/index.php"www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/article/psuchin/index.php). Although only listed under my name this piece was in fact a collaboration between myself and Peter Lewis, who took the actual photographs and selected and ordered them for publication.


11. The ambivalent numbering here is deliberate, echoing the problematic of classification. The section relating to Benjamin, for example, includes three special issues of journals devoted to that author – should they be counted as books or not? They are
here placed with the author’s conventionally-defined publications, though a separate section of the library contains other, “unattached” journals, including copies of *Art History*, *Book and Magazine Collector*, *Cabinet*, *Inventory*, *Mute*, *New German Critique*, *New Left Review*, *October*, *Telos* and others. The present text is merely introductory, and a fuller account of the library would require considerably more detail than can be provided at the present time. A part of the collection takes the form of folders containing photocopied articles, as well as copies of more extensive material, on a range of subjects. The material on Walter Benjamin runs to four folders of articles, cuttings and notes on many aspects of his life and work.

A further point about the item count provided here is that, notably in the case of Barthes, the most recent relevant acquisition for the library has yet to be shelved. Is Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Why I Love Barthes* (Polity, 2011) best placed amongst books authored by Robbe-Grillet or with the rest of the books about Barthes? There are already 19 of these, as opposed to those works actually written by Barthes. My usual “rule” with respect to this problem is that with certain authors – those who hold special status for me – all books about that writer are placed in that author’s section, regardless of whether the writer of such secondary volumes have their own section in the library or not. But in the present case, which is one in which the writer on Barthes is as important to me, in his own way, as Barthes himself, I can’t decide where the book should go. Obtaining a second copy of the book as a means of solving this dilemma is neither practicable nor desirable.

I do possess, in a few cases, a second copy of a given book. Two slightly different editions of Benjamin’s *Illuminations* sit side by side in the WB section. The one that has been in my possession for the longest period was acquired in 1979. In 2007 I found another copy of the book in a group of works for sale in *Any Amount of Books* in London’s Charing Cross Road. These volumes each bore a label from the book-dealer that read “From the Library of Angela Carter”. I also have AC’s copy of another of my favourite books, Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man*, a Cambridge University Press hardback from 1977. When I purchased the book (again in 2007) the back leaf of the dust jacket was folded into the book in such a way that it acted as what was perhaps a place marker for Carter, suggesting she may only have read as far as pp. 316-317. The preceding pages are a little more faded than these and those that follow them, and the edge of the pages are distinctly more faded in the earlier part of the book than in the latter, which had, seemingly for some considerable time, the protection afforded by the folded leaf.

12. The citing here of the numbers of books by or about members of the *Nouveau Roman*, and similar information about a few other writes, is intended to convey, if in a somewhat cursory fashion, a sense of the library’s scale and scope.

13. My copy of this book is a paperback published by Verso in 1983. The volume has since been reissued in several different versions, from which Baudelaire’s name has been removed.

14. One of only two books on UFOs kept out of storage is Desmond Leslie and George Adamski’s *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, Futura, 1977. This book contains a reproduction of what is claimed to be “The first photograph ever taken of a UFO (p.6). This is illustration No. 7, following p. 144, purporting to be a photo made by an astronomer, M Borilla, from a Mexican observatory on 12 August, 1883. It appears to show an insect-shaped “object” diagonally crossing the face of the sun. One’s interest in such pictures is not reliant upon accepting their veracity.


16. *The Library at Night*, p. 33. “Who am I?” is the psychoanalytical question *par excellence*. It is also the opening phrase of Andre Breton’s *Nadja* (Grove Press 1960), in which Nadja says to Breton, “‘Be careful: everything fades, everything vanishes. Something must remain of us…” (p. 100). *Nadja* is a book about ghosts and haunting. Manguel notes that in the darkness of the library at night “the atmosphere changes. Sounds become muffled…My movements feel unwittingly furtive, my activity secret. I turn into something of a ghost.” (p. 13).

In his *A Gazetteer of British Ghosts*, (Pan, revised edition, 1973) Peter Underwood recounts a story relating to Felbrigg Hall near Norwich that involves a relationship between a ghost and a library: “Later the house passed to the Kitton family,” writes Underwood, “and one of the Miss Kittons [reported that] …‘Mr Windham comes every night to look after his favourite books in the library. He goes straight to the shelves where they are: we hear him moving the tables and chairs about. We never disturb him though, for we intend to be ghosts ourselves some day and to come about the place just as he does.”’ (P. 78).

And in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (Robinson, 1999), it is within and around the library of the old house that the ghostly phenomena appear most active. Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (Argyll Films, 1963), based on Jackson’s book, retains this device of the library as the location of the central psychic force.

I was a student on the BA in Fine Art at Leeds Polytechnic from 1979 to 1982. During that period there were a large number of visitors to the department, either giving tutorials in the fine art studio, lectures to the whole course of around 150 students, or both. As regards the latter, these usually took place on Wednesday mornings, and involved a range of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and contexts. These included Art & Language (artists Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), Terry Atkinson (artist and writer), Ian Breakwell (artist and writer), Gavin Bryars (composer), Edward Cowie (composer), Paul Crowther (philosopher), Peter Fuller (art critic), Alec Gordon (writer and musician), Ron Geesin (musician), Alastair MacLennan (performance artist), Roland Miller (performance artist), Eric Mottram (literary and cultural critic, poet), Fred Orton (art historian), Genesis P Orridge (musician), Carl Plackman (sculptor), Sally Potter (filmmaker), Griselda Pollock (art historian), Snoo Wilson (playwright), Glynn Williams (sculptor), Tony Wilson (TV presenter and music "impresario"), and Marie Yates (artist). I'm sure there were others, but this list should give some indication of the kind of people who visited the department. What was very good about having such a range of visitors was that the student was subjected to a number of varying, sometimes conflicting, artistic, critical and cultural positions, as opposed to a narrow and apparently coherent picture of what it meant to be an artist or other type of cultural agent at that time. This broad church of practices, ideas and opinions was echoed in the course's internal philosophy (and indeed within what later came to be called "Postmodern" culture, in which the fine art course existed and operated). It wasn't so much that the course leaders did not know what the "right" thing to teach on a fine art course might be; rather, the whole of the western artworld at that time was operating in the wake of the radical shakeup produced by the appearance of Conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was thus appropriate that a fine art course whose defining model was, rightly or wrongl, that of pluralism made it a point of its teaching practice to bring in for presentations and discussions such a plethora of people and multiple points of view.

This approach in effect forced the student, and some of the staff too, to debate, either amongst themselves or, as it were, internally, the complexities, contradictions and "undecidables" of contemporary culture. It provided a broad cultural education rather "training", and encouraged introspection, criticism and further investigation in the library, in direct opposition to the practice of burying one's head in the sand and insisting that one just wanted to paint or sculpt, although, predictably, a number of students took this stance.

Some of the aforementioned lecturers came to the college only once, others came back several times. One very popular figure who visited the department two or three times a year whilst I was there was Eric Mottram. By “very popular” I mean that whenever he visited the lecture theatre was packed. Mottram, who had written the first full-length study of William Burroughs, was the kind of intellectual figure that art schools and universities used to readily support, people whose breadth of cultural knowledge was immense. On one occasion Mottram gave a talk about the Oedipus Complex and its modern electronic reincarnation within the music of the American rock group The Doors (first published as “Dionysus in America” in Other Times, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1975). I recall him (whether on this occasion or another) giving out a booklist which included works by Thomas Pynchon and Anne Rice, whose then practically unknown Interview with the Vampire he urged us to read. Mottram would look around the fine art studio during his visits, remember your name although he hadn’t seen you for several months or more, and occasionally purchase student work.

Art & Language were also, for a time, regular visitors. They discussed their then novel project, Portrait of VI Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock, and Baldwin gave a series of seminars (which I attended) on realism and art. I recall him using the term "lemma". Terry Atkinson, a former member of A&L, and like them an instigator of British conceptualism, spoke about the difficulties (and necessities) inherent in producing a politicised art practice.
The relations between image and text were paramount in his discussions, and even if some of what he talked about seemed difficult to grasp, one always left his lectures and seminars feeling that one had learnt a great deal.

Gavin Bryars gave an account of his practice as a composer, also detailing various other interests that had fed directly into his work. He discussed his in-depth study of Marcel Duchamp, carried out during a period when he was producing little or no music, and how certain approaches and techniques utilised by Duchamp led him – Bryars – into new and unorthodox musical fields. He also made reference to the then very obscure Parisian group of writers and mathematicians known as the “Oulipo” – Ouvroir de litterature potentielle or “workshop of potential literature” – and their companion group the Oulipopo (who seek out actual and fictional instances of the “perfect crime”). Bryars was mainly known then for his *The Sinking of the Titanic*, released on Obscure records in 1975, also a topic of discussion during and after his talk, which on that occasion, as on many others, continued in the “Coburg” pub.

Art & Language, Atkinson, Bryars and Mottram were all engaging speakers; some of the other visitors were less amenable to an art school audience, or they talked about what seemed then – and today too – irrelevancies. I recall that the main theme in Glynn Williams’ lecture was not his practice as a sculptor but his three studios – this was a talk that was more about property than about art. Peter Fuller turned up in suit and tie, but this was not the problem so much as his rather assertive and over-assured delivery. The audience applauded vigorously at the end (atypically for an art school talk), but I suspect he had “swayed” his listeners more through his table-thumping rhetoric that by the accuracy of his somewhat dubious convictions.

Fred Orton gave a very long and detailed exposition of the business and cultural interests involved in the setting up of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Griselda Pollock (another frequent visitor) spoke eloquently and at length about ideological constructions within the visual arts – in Van Gogh, for example, or the films of Busby Berkeley.

The historian G E M de Ste Croix, was not, as I remember, in town to speak to the Fine Art department but was giving a talk for students on another course. The art students were invited along. His talk was quite formal, and he made reference, point by point, to notes he had given out at the beginning of his presentation, which considered class struggle in the ancient Greek world (to paraphrase the title of his 1981 book on that theme). I don’t think very many art students attended this presentation, but it was fantastically informative, an “eye opener”, as the saying goes.

---

**Erica Sutcliffe and Liane El-Masry**

**To Criticise the Critic: an Interview with Peter Suchin**

*Reactive, Leeds, 2005*


As a critic: Suchin has written for many journals including *Frieze, Untitled, Contemporary, Portfolio, AN*, *Art Monthly* and *Mute*, and has contributed to several books, most recently *New Media Art: Practice and Context in the UK 1994 - 2004* (Ed. Lucy. Kimbell, London, 2004). This interview was conducted by letter and E-mail in April 2005.
**Erica Sutcliffe/Liane El-Masry:** How important is it to you to put the criticism into being a "critic"?

**Peter Suchin:** I don't see much point in being a "critic" if one isn't prepared to be actually critical. The critic should examine and assess the artist's work, and the whole apparatus around it too - the gallery, the curator, collectors, everything that affects and contextualises what the artist does. Of course it isn't always possible to do all this in a short review but at least one can try to raise questions, bring out for the reader things they might not otherwise see. The critic is, or should be, an independent figure, neither an unthinking supporter of the artist or gallery, nor the "servant" of the audience.

**ES/LE-M:** A piece of writing is very important and can be very influential. Do you believe that writing can be strong and powerful? Do you think that good pieces of writing can change the way that people view things?

**PS:** Yes, they can, and in a sense that's how high the "stakes" are: can one, through one's writings, have some kind of effect? There have always been powerful writers associated with the major art movements, people who have argued the case for the importance of new kinds of art. Artworks always exist within a linguistic context. Critics can direct attention to work that might otherwise have remained marginal or invisible, or debunk it, pull it to pieces. Some of the major developments of the last 50 years might not even have been seen as "art" without the strong support of writers who defended them. In some ways art criticism is close to, or is actually a version of art teaching: explaining things, raising questions, defending or rendering problematic the practices and conventions of what is put forward as art.

**ES/LE-M:** After reading your article "The Critic Never Sleeps" (Art Monthly, No. 266, May 2003, also available at www.artmonthly.co.uk), I began to understand more about the world of the critic. I really enjoyed this article. Do you think that a lot of critics at the minute are just writing what people want to hear (nonsense, really, just keeping the artists happy)?

**PS:** There are many reasons why critics write the way they do. It isn't so much a case of keeping artists happy, though that can be one factor. At worst, critics may be trying to "keep in" with gallery owners, curators, magazine or newspaper editors or other people who can help the critic's career. But I don't generally think of criticism as being about "writing what people want to hear". How, in any case, could a critic really know what the audience wanted? Does the audience itself know? It could just as well be argued that many artists are guilty of playing to what they imagine is expected of them. "The Critic Never Sleeps" was a response to another writer's rather pompous and, I feel, idiotic claims for art and criticism. I don't think he was writing what he thought was expected of him, he believed the rubbish he was coming out with. His piece was published in a widely-read, well-respected magazine and I decided that to ignore it would have been irresponsible. I wanted to give, at least, a different point of view. The title "The Critic Never Sleeps" was intended to refer to a number of things: to being vigilant as a critic, to losing sleep through being worried or concerned about things, but also to the idea that some critics seem to be walking about in a daze. There are other ways of reading that phrase too.
**ES/LE-M:** There is a lot of different art out there at the minute. How do you think contemporary art has been doing recently? Is there a lot more to come or are we heading into crisis?

**PS:** The idea and actuality of what art is or might become changes through time. Sometimes, what looks like a crisis can in fact be invention and the reconfiguring of values. For example, when Impressionism first appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century it seemed, perhaps to almost everyone at first, to be chaotic, formless, in short a "crisis". What was in crisis was the old, academic way of painting, not the new work. But I do think that there are sometimes periods of decline, if not "crisis" exactly. Much of what is called "young British art" is not much more than a watered down, weedy version of Conceptual Art. In the 1960s, when Conceptualism was new, it radicalised how art was thought about and displayed. But the yBa is often only a mannered version of that, a kind of Conceptualism without concepts, without the strong ideas and rigour of the work upon which it has drawn so heavily. When this early work was first made it had no place in the market and in many cases had been produced in a deliberate reaction against the commercial sphere. It didn't look like "art"; people believed that the galleries wouldn't be able to deal with it (pun intended). But the yBa has no shame about making money, and to some degree the very existence of the yBa as a media phenomenon was constructed (by dealers and other influential figures) with commercial success in mind. If this reading is correct then the word "crisis" might be appropriate. First of all, in the sense that the more recent work is derivative and weak, there's a "crisis" in terms of standards of art-making; but, secondly, there's a moral crisis too. The whole of Britain has "gone corporate", including art. People can't see that art doesn't have to just be another "business", another bit of the tourist industry. It didn't used to be like that. Artists used to want to produce alternative readings of society, not just be entirely complicit with it. Thankfully, not all artists have turned into commercial artists, however.

**ES/LE-M:** What in art culture do you really respect nowadays?

**PS:** As I mention above, there is still some critical art and critical commentary about art too. If artists don't refuse to support corporate culture there'll soon be no point in having "art" at all - it will just be (it has already in part become) just a flash and cunning way of decorating the world of shopping and TV. Paradoxically, Capitalism needs art to still appear to be critical and independent so that this will rub off onto other, less honourable activities. This is why business is getting more and more involved with art - so that it can pretend to be cultured, as well as supportive of "alternative" views. One wonders who or what is really making the decisions about the work - the artist or the corporation that is sponsoring it?

**ES/LE-M:** Have you ever thought about creating your own publication? A book about yourself and your work maybe?

**PS:** I'm currently putting together an anthology of my writings. I have various ideas about different ways of bringing my writings and my other work together in a book but whether I'll actually do this I don't know.

**ES/LE-M:** In the future, would you prefer to carry on as an artist or put everything into being a "critic"?
PS: I've been presented with this dilemma before, usually by people who tell me that the only way to "get on" is by concentrating on one or the other. I've no intention of doing just one thing, however. What is interesting for me are the correspondences, but also the differences between being an artist and being a critic. It doesn't follow that because you do several things some of them suffer in quality. This could be the case, but the opposite is also plausible. Being an artist might make you into a better critic, and vice versa.

ES/LE-M: What piece of writing are you most proud of?

PS: There isn't just one single piece that I'm pleased with. I like a number of the things I've written, each for different reasons. I like very much the piece you mention, "The Critic Never Sleeps", because I feel I managed to get a number of important points into a text that's pretty short - less than 1000 words. The article caused a debate in the pages of Art Monthly which lasted several months. An earlier text for the same magazine, "Campus Capitalism", generated around six months of discussion in the letters pages of AM, which shows that it had hit a nerve, focused attention on an issue that clearly affected a number of people working in the arts and education. Debate means discussion, not raw and unsupported assertion coupled with passive acceptance.

There's an essay I wrote for Mute magazine about Roland Barthes (Mute, No. 26, 2003) which is one of my favourites too. I should also mention my review, again in Art Monthly, of the Chapman brothers' 2003 Oxford show. (AM 267, June 2003). This text is very much an attack on their whole approach rather than just on specific works. Complete strangers have come up to me at exhibition openings and thanked me for writing it, and the editor of AM, who doesn't usually directly comment upon the things she has commissioned, was very flattering about it too. Much of the time one has no idea what people think of one's work or even if anyone reads it at all, so such responses really stand out.

ELSE/M: Is there a painting that is special to you?

PS: If you mean a work by myself, yes, a painting called Tempered, Distended, Folded, Suspended (2003). I like almost everything about it, including the title. There are many works (not just paintings) by other artists that I especially like.

ES: Has there been a particular period or happening in your life which made you realise what you wanted to do?

When I was, I think, about 14 I saw a television programme about Turner - that led to me reading about him and getting interested in art generally. There was also, around the same time, an article about Kurt Schwitters in a Sunday magazine. A few years later I read an interview with Brian Eno in New Musical Express in which he said he'd gone to art school partly because he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. I knew what he meant, though that wasn't the only interesting thing he said there. The reasons people get involved in something can be multiple. For example, I had a very encouraging art teacher at school (and several at art school too) - that really makes a difference, and also a close friend who was looking at many of the same things I was. How one becomes who or what one is is a very complicated matter, not necessarily reducible to just one or two points of influence.

ES/LE-M: Your art work is a very big part of your life. Would you consider selling your work or is it too meaningful?
**PS:** I have sold quite a lot of work already but at the same time I've kept back quite a number of pieces too - either by deliberately not showing them or by making clear that, though on exhibition, they aren't for sale. Your question implies that my work might be so precious to me that I wouldn't want to part with it. But you can become too precious about it. As time passes I often become less keen on works I've made which, when I first made them, I thought I'd always want to keep. That's another hugely complex question: why one should or should not sell work. It can be quite thrilling when people want to buy something you've done, and the money can help you to keep your practice going - by allowing you time to do more work, say, or pay for materials. It's impossible to survive in this society without money, except at a very basic, debilitating level.

**ES/LE-M:** How would you describe your paintings?

**PS:** A couple of years ago I referred to my work as "a worried version of abstract painting". That may seem a bit glib but it will have to do for now.

**ES/LE-M:** Would you criticise your own artwork? Have you ever done this?

**PS:** Well, I'm not against doing it! When you make a new work this can itself be seen as a kind of criticism of previous work, an attempt to make something happen that has failed to come off in earlier attempts. Or you may want to leave behind the old practice completely and try and operate in an altogether different way. In these cases art practice is itself a form of what one might call "implicit" criticism. I have sometimes occasionally written about my own visual work, though not in an excessively critical way. But I can imagine certain positions from which to criticise it, though I think artists should do that anyway. In talking and writing about your own work you can bring to light problems that aren't immediately apparent. Then it's time to do something about them! One function of criticism, including self-criticism, is to improve the work. If the practice is strong, rigorous, then it should be tough enough to stand up to attack, and if it doesn't do this then it is part of the artist's job to attend to the criticisms, so that the next time round the potentially negative comments are neutralised in advance.

---

**A Discussion between Jacques Rogers and Peter Suchin**

*Point of Address, selected by Peter Suchin, Outpost, Norwich, 2010 (gallery leaflet)*

**Jacques Rogers:** To begin with I'd like to ask you about your title, *Point of Address* – you mentioned this related to your experience of writing letters to friends and colleagues.

**Peter Suchin:** I was thinking about how one uses different forms of language with different people – personal or intimate communications in some cases, in others more formal, guarded or carefully-worded acts of writing or speech are involved. With something like [this] show one is dealing with a fairly wide range of artworks, each in effect implying a distinct mode of communication. The expression “point of Address” is meant to suggest this range of positions which is in some ways paradigmatic of the broader artworld too. It might also bring to mind ideas about who is being addressed, and also how that person – the viewer – positions him or herself in relation to the work. Then there's a sort of indirect reference to the
name of the gallery, “Outpost”, to where it is, its address in terms of its actual physical location, but also how its name implies being on the edge of an already-known territory. The implication here might be one of a “new address”, a new or unusual way of communication or exchange.

**JR:** For me this illustrates how a group show is a loaded premise in the way it represents a complicated range of active agents. During the selection process it seemed to me that you overcame this problem through an intuitive method that was informed by your own artistic practice rather than any preconceived curatorial tactics – perhaps this raises the awkward question of taste?

**PS:** Well one can’t deny that one has a particular taste or sensibility, or ideas about what one thinks is good or important art. But when carrying out the selection I tried to take individual works on their own terms, looking at what had been submitted with a view to seeing what might be put together from what had been sent in. Certain formal devices or themes presented themselves, and I went with these with a view to assembling a hopefully coherent show, as opposed to one that was merely a survey or “snapshot” of the kinds of work sent in. I thought of the activity of choosing an exhibition as being like putting together a collage, an assemblage of diverse elements brought together into some kind of workable or coherent whole.

**JR:** Your selection seems to be generous both in terms of the number of artists you chose to show and the space afforded to each work to remain autonomous. Like a collage the various elements were dealt with a certain equality (perhaps it is important to note that the artists’ CVs were disregarded). Does this reflect an empathy for an artwork’s capacity to store and transmit meaning?

**PS:** I definitely wanted each work to have some space of its own, to try and let works stand on their own terms, as it were. At the same time, I feel the show should be more than the sum of its parts; otherwise it would just be a “ragbag” of disparate pieces. Nearly everything was selected from images that were online or emailed in, and it was a calculated guess as to how many works could be included without having to do a “salon” hang (which I didn’t want), or cramming things close together. The selection had to be done quite quickly and there wasn’t time to go through CVs. In any case, I wasn’t trying to pick people who’d shown at important galleries or attended particular art schools. I tried to pick works on their own merits, and in relation to how they might fit into the broader picture of the exhibition itself. This brings to mind another aspect of the show’s title, touched on above: the matter of addressing the public, presenting a hopefully interesting, as opposed to self-indulgent, exhibition.
Section Two: Essays and Polemics
Art Education

THE TREASURE OF THE PERPLEXED
Ignorance as ‘Bliss’ in Fine Art Education

Peter Suchin

What strikes me, if we can start out from Duchamp, is the way it can seem, from a certain point of view, to be difficult to be an artist if one isn’t a philosopher as well.¹

Some years ago Charles Harrison remarked that departments of Fine Art possibly contained a larger percentage of students with the potential for ‘real and effective intellectual achievement’ than in any other comparable form of higher education.² More recently the claim that art education offers ‘almost unique in our system, the deep learning which enables a student to avoid fragmentation whilst going into some areas closely’ was made by Malcolm Miles.³ Both assessments are optimistic but today, I think, inaccurate. Harrison was writing at a time when so-called Conceptual Art had brought into the foreground the more cognitive aspects of art-making (even if much of what fell beneath the umbrella of ‘Conceptual Art’ was the misplaced pratfall of very poor philosophers indeed). And today, with the market-engendered fad of a ‘return to painting’ a concern for the more progressive lessons of Conceptualism cannot be but rarely discerned. Critical activity is curtailed and it is to the ostensibly democratic sphere of ‘feeling’ that attention is once again directed.¹ This New Spirit is a very materialistic spirit too, fiscal considerations being well in evidence. Lyotard notes that when aesthetic criteria are absent money provides a workable measure of value.⁴ Postmodernism is only apparently plural. Many stylistic distinctions are subtle, and artists, because they cannot generate for themselves rigorous criteria, lapse into the following of fashions. The lack of intellectual input into art education has much to do with this. Fragmentation is not avoided when feeling is stressed at the expense of measured reflection. It is a truth to observe that children who are not particularly disposed to academic subjects at school find themselves pushed towards artistic concerns in the hope that they will somehow flower in that field. This is to be put on the wrong track from the start. My point is not that students of art should be academically successful; it is, rather, that art should not be associated with a lack of learning. This reading of art as an occupation only worthy of those who are not intellectually nimble is one reason why art schools are places of indifference and confusion.⁵ With respect to the inhabitants of such institutions a line from Schiller’s Aesthetic Letters comes to mind: ‘They would first have to be wise in order to love wisdom’, an application not, I hope, strictly accurate.⁶

Because the view of the artist as innocent is prevalent it does not follow that it is a productive account. That it may be so in financial terms is neither here nor there. Art, if it is to keep its distance from entertainment, requires a philosophical component. This remark should not be taken to mean that artists should cease the making of senseless objects, taking up instead the philosopher’s pen. The making of art should be an inherently critical activity. Art’s critical function is apparent when it challenges the hegemony of that which has been rendered ‘natural’ in our culture by the eyes of Science. Fine Art departments are seen as uncomfortable luxuries because the ‘pure research’ they tend to engender does not correspond with other, more brutally utilitarian findings.⁷

Miles refers to deep thinking, and he employs the term ‘synthesis’ and ‘embodiment’ or contemplation of the imagination;¹ This should lead us to another term of category, that of the New; . . . nine times out of ten the new is only the stereotype of novelty’ writes Roland Barthes in The Pleasure of the Text.⁸ He continues: ‘The new is not a fashion, it is a value, the basis of all criticism.¹ One would do well to keep these distinctions in mind.

Art is a privileged activity in many accounts but if such special pleading takes the form of a refusal of knowledge it is wrong. Art students are encouraged to make things but they should also be encouraged to interpret them, to think critically about their work and the environment in which it is made and displayed. The student who slavishly awaits the germination of an ostensibly innocent expression has been misled. Such an ‘Immaculate Conception’ is not likely to occur. Art is a heuristic practice but it must be an informed practice. To promote naivety as a treasure is to protect at all costs to encourage cultural stagnation. In the jungle of Postmodernism such a ‘treasure’ is, and can only be, the treasure of the perplexed.

¹ Jean-François Lyotard in Bernard Blistène, A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard, Flash Art, No. 121, March 1985, p.33.
⁴ . . . exhibitions . . . are stage-managed by the media . . . and thus popular viewing is not ‘popular’. No matter how many people visit the galleries painting cannot enter into any relationship with its audience because its function has already been prescribed by society. The audience is only expected to look not think; the best painting can achieve in such a situation is an expressive not a cognitive function, R.K. Wynnard, Painting and Technological Society, The British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 26, No. 1, Winter 1986, p.59. I quote Wynnard at length because his paper might be interpreted as indicating a need for the deployment of tactics designed to counter the reductive presentations of work to which he makes reference. One might regard the same for the development of such tactics to rest with the art schools, though Wynnard himself does not present counter-strategies.
⁶ For a critical account of this term’s many references see Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, New Left Review, No. 146, July-August 1984, pp. 53-92.
⁷ The title of Ken Rowat’s paper ‘The student artist as an academic outcast’ (The Guardian, March 27, 1979, p.12) is significant. The incorporation of art colleges into polytechnics has not, it would appear, encouraged interpretations between art and language.
THE DESTRUCTION OF ART AS AN INSTITUTION:  
THE ROLE OF THE AMATEUR

Part One

WE begin with a generalisation. One of the most salient features of Modernism was its critical relation to the culture and society from which it emerged. With the work of the Cubists, or of that of Joyce or Eliot, the nineteenth-century model of 'truth to nature' was severely challenged. This attack upon realism was taken further by the activities of the Dadaists and Surrealists. Peter Burger has claimed that for these groups the issue was not merely one of questioning certain forms adhered to by more conventional artists, but was rather, one of attempting to destroy the institution of art itself.1 It is my contention, that this concern, insofar as it can be isolated, is a more radical project than those attempts - by, in their very different ways, Lukács and Adorno - to produce aesthetic theories which could salvage certain forms of art for the revolution.2 Lukács promoted the idea of revolutionary, critical realism, whilst Adorno advocated 'difficult' abstract work as the only mode of art which could resist the false society of late capitalism, resist it through the deliberate refusal of direct communication. This paper will attempt to outline and defend certain aspects of the attack on the institution of art, with particular reference to a number of theoretical assertions. Attacks upon the institution of art from within art itself, such as the work of Duchamp or the closely related work of the so-called conceptual artists of the sixties and seventies will be largely ignored. I hope to show that dismantling the art institution is a project more directly compatible with left-wing interests than the various attempts to theorise a left-wing art practice as such.

Marxists are concerned to bring about a radical and far reaching transformation of society, replacing the divisive, biased, culture of capitalism with a social formation based on considerably more egalitarian lines. Marx termed this free society, in which the distinction between the producers and consumers would be eradicated, 'communist society'. He viewed the realm of the aesthetic as something which was a fundamental part of being human, and not merely as an aspect of life to which only certain people - artists and their admirers - were suited. Put another way, human beings are fundamentally creative. In the capitalist work place, the worker, forced to repeat over and over again the same simply activity, is alienated from his or her own 'essence'. Intellectual and manual activities are kept apart and the empathic satisfaction which results from carrying out each and every aspect of a given job in not forthcoming. Furthermore, the worker is consigned to a very limited form of life, insofar as he or she is expected to stick to a particular activity to the more or less total exclusion of all others.

In sharp contrast to the debased worker, stands the artist, someone who carries out all the numerous activities necessitated by the making of a work of art. Intellectual and sensuous practices are not pitted against one another but operate in unison. The artist's labour is unalienated labour. Thus, whilst the Artist-Genius of bourgeois culture still presents, by his or her 'expertise', the division of labour inherent in a society divided into producers and consumers, it is still possible to see in such a dedication to aesthetic activity a model, albeit distorted, of the future human subject. In Marx and Engels' "The German Ideology" we find the following passage:

"The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of labour. If, even in certain social conditions, everyone was an excellent painter, that would not at all exclude the possibility of each of them being an original painter(...) In any case, with a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the artist to some definite art, thanks to which he is exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc(...) the very name of his activity adequately expressing the narrowness of his professional development and his dependence on division of
This quotation may be fruitfully juxtaposed with another from the same work:

"In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticised after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic." 4

These remarks are, in some senses, utopian projections, the outline of a possible but hardly inevitable future society, one in which the full potential of each and every human being is unleashed. Is there today any evidence apparent which might suggest that the destruction of the hierarchy which Marx and Engels despised might actually come about? It appears that with regard to the field of art and aesthetics such evidence does in fact exist. It has been pointed out by a number of writers sympathetic to Marx's work - among them Hans Hess, Raymond Williams and Roger L. Taylor 5 - that the belief that something is or is not 'art' (with all the resonances of superiority that the term implies) arose in the Seventeenth Century and is currently undergoing some kind of crisis or dissolution. Taylor, for example, argues that the term 'art' is employed as a means of conferring status upon a select number of things and concerns which are part of high bourgeois life. The title of his book - "Art, An Enemy Of The People" - itself calls up his thesis that things which have been labelled 'art' are thus labelled only by route of a certain snobbery and feeling of superiority. In attacking the art concept, Taylor does not mean to belittle the making of paintings, music, dancing, the writing of fiction (and so on); it is the organisational forms which surround such activities that he is keen to criticise. 'Works of art', he writes:

"(...)are identifiable as such simply because(...) social processes have fixed onto them the label 'art'. That this is the sole ground for something being art is demonstrated by the fact that to be accepted within the appropriate area guarantees that something is art, and by the fact that the reasons for and explanations of acceptance have, over the centuries, been so diverse that acceptance cannot be anything other than arbitrary." 5

Elsewhere, Taylor supplies two examples of this conferral of status. The first concerns the objects produced by so-called primitive 'craftsmen':

"Primitive art is art simply on the grounds that the high bourgeoisie has assimilated such works into the category it has created. In fact, as we know, this assimilation is very recent and it has involved the removal of such objects from museums to be re-housed in art galleries. The point at which the high bourgeoisie takes up these objects is the point at which they enter the category of art." 6

He continues:

"Another significant case of this is the gradual incursion of Pop music into the category of art. At the point at which the high bourgeoisie press creates space for Pop, comes the haggling as to its aesthetic status. Fifties Pop doesn't enter the upper middle class world and so there are no pedantic debates as to whether the performers are the new musical avant-garde, whereas sixties Pop does and so the debate begins."

The concept of art is then, like all concepts, a concept with a specific history, one which is indexed to the manipulations of a specific social group. In what follows we shall be concerned with what is essentially an attack on that concept.

Part Two

In a talk given in America in April 1957, Marcel Duchamp made the following remark:
"(...)the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists."

Some years later, in the context of an interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp practically repeated his earlier claim:

"The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognised by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can't stop that, because, in brief, it's a product of two poles - there's the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it."  

Duchamp's remarks have some correspondence with a tendency which has been particularly noticeable in the theoretical work done in France since the 1960's, mainly in and around the avant-garde journal "Tel Quel". What is being emphasised, both in Duchamp's pronouncements and in the theoretical work to which I refer, is the importance of the viewer's or reader's contribution to the work of art. French theory has indeed consistently stressed the work and involvement of the reader in the production of the work of art. No longer the passive recipient of meanings and values imposed by the Artist or Author, the reader is considered as a producer of the text. Many recent and contemporary works of art - a good example would be Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" - are put together in such a way so as to demand an active recipient, a reader who in effect writes the work.

The most important proponent of the 'reader-as-writer' thesis (and a thinker whose work will be the main focus of the remainder of this paper) is Roland Barthes. Barthes wrote some twenty books but he is most often remembered for his short essay of 1968, "The Death Of The Author". At the end of this essay Barthes wrote:

"Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to be fooled no longer(...) we know that to give writing its future it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."  

The refusal of the Author-God in favour of the reader suggests a desire to democratise the text, to open up the work of art to multiple interpretations. The reader becomes a practitioner. Speaking of his own intended shift from the role of critic to that of novelist, Barthes remarked:

"I put myself in the position of the subject who makes something, and no longer of a subject who speaks about something: I am not studying a product, I assume a production(...) the world(...) comes to me as(...) a practice: I proceed to another type of knowledge (that of the Amateur)."

The theme of the amateur appears at many points in Barthes' work and is an important one for our study. The amateur is, as Barthes puts it in his autobiography, "someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mantry or competition(...) he is anything but a hero(...) he is - he perhaps will be - the counter-bourgeois artist". The amateur is not defined by an inferior technical competence but by a form of production which does not demand public recognition. It is a question of personal and disinterested investment. Barthes himself made over seven hundred paintings and drawings which he refused to exhibit despite the public exposure he could easily have claimed for his work through his fame as a writer. This idiosyncratic interpretation of the amateur interlocks with another of Barthes' concerns, what he calls the writerly text. The opposition between 'readable' and 'writerly' texts appears in that form at the beginning of "S/Z", published two years after "The Death Of The Author", though the distinction is implicit within the earlier essay. Here is the relevant passage:

"Our evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writings(...) which texts would I consent to write (to rewrite)(...) to put forth as a force in this world of mine? What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the writerly. Why
is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterised by the When a producer Indiana, to the text and the user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader."

The 'death of the Author' thus refers to the dissolution of the authority of the author, not the end of all 'serious' or 'feelingful' artistic production. The idea has political (and not merely artistic) consequences. Any genuinely socialist culture could only come into being with the decline of the artist as a showman or genius. It is in this interest that Barthes's amateur takes on significance. The film-maker Maya Deren gave a definition of that term which echoes Barthes' when she wrote:

"The very classification 'amateur' has an apologetic ring. But that very word - from the Latin 'amateur' - 'Lover' means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity."[3]

With the amateur, producer and consumer coincide; a situation which Peter Burger noted as being actually apparent within the practice of the Surrealists. As Burger puts it, for the Surrealists, the concepts of producer and consumer "lose their meaning; producers and recipients no longer exist. All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best one can".[4] A few more words from Barthes should finally suffice to make this particular concept of the amateur clear. 'Technical development and the evolution of mass culture reinforce the division between producers and consumers to a frightening extent. We are a consumer society and not at all a society of amateurs. 'The amateur is not a consumer.'[7]

It is not difficult to see how Barthes' interest in the amateur might be ridiculed by those who wish to maintain a hierarchy in the arts. One might anticipate the claim that amateurs produce, almost by definition, mediocre work. Yet since, as Michel Foucault suggests in "What Is An Author?", the foregrounding of certain practices and texts as being of greater importance than others is an effect of Power, the question of quality dissolves if such Power is successfully contested.[8]

To repeat the claim made at the beginning of this paper, left-wing critical work in the sphere of the arts must take the form of the destruction of the institution of art, not that of advocating some kind of 'voluntaristic' 'left-wing' art. Two quotations from the Art & Language group are pertinent. Here is the first:

"Left-wing art (in liberal democracies) thinks art is ever so important, is the shrine of 'human values' (...) It will not admit its marginality and the possible necessity of this."[9]

And the second:

"Should we ask what art can do? Nothing, without confronting the real mechanisms of domination. Realism versus Modernism, figurative art versus abstract art are all choices (yes) choices. It doesn't matter whether one does abstract art or not; the real problem is that artists are educated to have nothing to do except agonise over the amazing virtue of their own cultured choices', their dummy agency in the fake reality."

In conclusion, I offer these observations. In Nietzsche's now very timely book "Untimely Meditations", its author makes a comparison which is most appropriate to our 'postmodern' situation. Culture is 'above all, unity of style in all the expressions of the life of a people'. Its opposite barbarism, is a 'lack of style or a chaotic jumble of all styles'.[10] In the barbaric condition of late capitalist 'culture', it is neither Realism or Abstraction which holds the monopoly in the issue of ascertaining a 'correct' and effective critical art practice. What matters is how 'art' and its institutions are conceptualised in relation to the wider culture. It is not the practices of art which offer a resistance to capitalism today but their theory.

Peter Suchin (first published in Variant 5, Glasgow Summer/Autumn '88).

34
Footnotes
2. See the anthology of writings assembled under the title "Aesthetics and Politics", New Left Books, 1977, edited by NLB.
7. Roger Taylor, "The Marxist Theory Of Art", Radical Philosophy No. 5, Summer 1983. This and the following reference p.34.
13. See the catalogue which accompanied an Italian exhibition of Barthes' visual work held in 1981, the year after Barthes' death: "Roland Barthes Carte Segni", Electa (Milan), 1981. The March-April 1981 issue of Flash Art (No. 102) contains an English translation of Carmine Benincasa’s catalogue essay, under the title "Roland Barthes And The Polyphony Of Pleasures".
18. In "What Is An Author?", Foucault suggests that "the author(...) is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses, in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction(...) The author is(...) the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning". This essay is included in Josue V. Harari (ed), "Textual Strategies", Methuen, 1980. The remark I have quoted is from p. 159.
19. This and the following quotation are from Art & Language, "Art For Society?", Art & Language Vol. 4. No. 4. June 1980, pages 9 and 11 respectively.
Some years ago I held the temporary and curiously-titled position of "Critic in Residence" within the visual arts department of a university in the North of England. The main requirement of this residency was to publish articles and reviews relating to current art practice in the region, as well as to make contributions to conferences, seminars and other forums in the public domain. This brief was not, however, supplemented with any kind of definition of, or discussion about what exactly might be meant by the term "critic", nor precisely what the role of a such a person when based within an art school should be. In spite of this silence it was clearly apparent that the position and function of "the critic" was not read by the art school community as ideologically neutral or open to argument. On the contrary, presumptions as to what a critic should do or be were legion, and were, apparently, quite self-evident in their implications and purview.

Such expectations were, for example, vividly revealed by the manner in which artists, tutors and students attached to the department would casually but confidently ask if I would review or otherwise write about their work. They did not appear to think I might say "no", and expressed surprise if I indicated that the matter was not quite as straightforward as they had hitherto assumed.

Two main strands of expectation ran, I think, through these "unquestioning" requests, neither of which I shared. The first of these was that it was the critic's job to promote artists, the function of the former being regarded in some unspecified way as subservient to the latter, such writers existing only to support and validate artists' work. That I or indeed any other critic might not share this view was a possibility never raised for debate. Nor was it understood that if I did write about a given artist then this person would have to accept that they had little or no control over my text. The possibility of a critic being actually critical of, and even quite antagonistic towards the work under examination was yet one more factor suppressed by the artist, for whom the word "review" had somehow come to mean praising or defending, as opposed to rigorously analysing, and perhaps even "pulling to pieces", the work. Furthermore, such an act of criticism might imply not the critic's lack of understanding of what the artist was trying to achieve but that there were difficulties and contradictions within and around the practice under scrutiny.

The confident naivety of such artists also blinded them to the fact that it was magazine editors, and not critics who had the power to decide which artists were, and in what context and form, written about or otherwise publicised. [1]

The second stereotypical projection made by artists with respect to critics was exemplified for me when an artist uttered, upon us being introduced, words to the effect of "oh, it's the enemy". Although this remark was intended, partially at least, as a joke, it indicated a certain way of thinking about critics as people who are parasitic upon artists and, since critics supposedly know nothing about what they are writing or talking about, as producers of jargon or nonsense. In this view the critic is not seen as a person whose time and energy is invested in an activity that is parallel with, or a productive extension of that of the artist, but as someone whose contribution is a kind of "evil", unnecessary supplement to artistic work. Caught up in the artist's rude refutation of the critic's practice is an idea about the self-sufficient nature of visual art, about the visual artist's sovereign right to express him or
herself in and through the objects he or she makes, which then, so it is implied, "speak" directly to the viewer. In this understanding the practice of art is regarded as a "visual language", a channel of exchange utterly independent of, and indeed locked in an antagonistic relationship with language as it is conventionally defined.

For my own part, the position I begin from is that there is no such thing as an art practice which doesn’t in some way or other involve language, in the ordinary sense of that term. Language is present at every level of the work’s making and reception, whether that of personal taste (“I really like that painting”), of the assigning of titles and other "supplementary" linguistic features, or of the acts of description and analysis carried out in magazines, catalogues, newspapers, television and radio programmes, as well as within scholarly journals and books. When artists talk with a dealer about the percentage of the sale price they think they should receive the y use words, whether or not the artwork “speaks”, in their view, “for itself”.

There is always language somewhere in, around, connected with the visual work. One might even propose that it is a function of all “interesting” work that it generates language, such documentation and dialogue becoming in effect part of the work’s meaning, “mentality” and field of influence. If a piece of work is sufficiently cohesive it will be able to survive any amount of criticism, remaining at the centre of even contradictory readings of its modus operandi. Conversely, if the work is shallow and insubstantial it will easily be pulled to pieces by a virile critical account.

The cliche that ordinary and, in particular, specialised or "theoretical" language poisons the purportedly rarefied air in which the fine artist dwells is a complicated, and I think insidious fantasy held by many producers and consumers of art. Visual art is understood by such people to operate above and beyond words, a universally-legible means of conveying “feelings” across all cultural and social boundaries, and to any viewer whatsoever. Coupled to this is the belief that to think critically about works of art destroys their (imagined) "magic" and mystery. What is called feeling is, in such superficial conceptualisations, assumed to hold a much more democratic franchise than thought, as though intellectual activity was not as explicitly human and "universal" an attribute as the experiencing of emotional states.

The "visual language" idea is a complicated and contradictory bundle of conceits, sealed within the current culture of art as though it were a holy writ, border or code against which all transgression was futile, and at any rate undesired. The non-language of "visual language" is the paradoxical lingua franca of contemporary art practice and, much of the time, of what passes for art criticism too. Within the latter terrain, Andrew Graham-Dixon's book on Howard Hodgkin is a notable case in point [2] Throughout this work reference is made to Hodgkin's "visual language", though the phrase is never, not even sketchily, explained. The implication, nonetheless, is that the marks comprising Hodgkin's paintings form a coherent, legible code, a "language" which every "visually literate" person will be able to read. This seems to be an idealistic belief at best, raising many more problems of understanding and explanation than it resolves, and encouraging along the way an extremely sloppy form of thinking about the operations and effects of visual art. In contrast to this promotion of the allegedly inexplicable metaphysics of painting's "voice" Roland Barthes notes that "we have not been able to establish either painting’s lexicon or its general grammar...". [3] In short, the structure of painting is nothing like that of language, and writers such as Graham-Dixon are
giving an utterly misleading account of how visual works of art convey meaning when they employ such commonplace but oxymoronic terminology.

Language is comprised of a limited number of repeatable units (i.e. the alphabet), coupled with a set of rules (i.e. grammar) which determine the forms and parameters of such units' meaningful combination. Painting does not possess a fixed number of discrete and repeatable units, though presumably Graham-Dixon is treating the spots, splashes, stripes and squiggles of paint found within Hodgkin's work as though they are elements of a language as normally defined. And whilst painting of course has conventions, histories and traditions it cannot seriously be claimed that it is in possession of something structurally identical to what is in the case of written language known as grammar. The absurdity of the analogy is rendered further obtuse and implausible when the possibility of an individual developing his or her own "visual language" is encouraged, as it often is, by fine art or graphics lecturers in conversation with their students. Language is, through and through, a social, and not an isolated, individual thing, and whilst some individuals clearly do develop highly idiosyncratic ways of speaking and writing, to talk of individuals producing their own unique language is to give voice to a logical absurdity. If such a thing were possible it would no longer be something we could convincingly call a language, since no one other than the person who had instigated it would be able to understand it. [4]

Terry Atkinson has been particularly critical of the sloppy conceptualising and mystificatory teaching associated with the term "visual language", and has traced it back some way to its source as an ideology connected with Romanticism, Humanism and expression:

The notion of a distinctive "visual language" is founded upon the realm of the instincts. This is a "language", it is alleged, of unmediated instinctual access, which in turn assumes language itself to be transparent in the sense of it being merely a medium in which individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things. The notion of "visual language" is a kind of common sense still central to the dominant discourse in art schools. By common sense discourse I mean any discourse which demands to be easily read and is therefore compelled to reproduce its most familiar assumptions and values...The conception of the artist is at the centre of the Western humanist-empiricist-idealistic interpretation of the world. Humanism proposes that "man" is the origin of meaning, action and history. This is a weak position because it locates meaning in a single place. The notion of an unmediated "visual language" is a typical piece of this common sense meaning fixing. Linked strongly to and interdependent with this notion of a "visual language" is the notion of the artist as an ideologically unyoked, centred subject. The yearning for this state of freedom from ideology is itself a symptom of ideological alignment. [5]

Atkinson has also observed that:

A common claim in art is that such and such (say a painting) says what language cannot say. In art practice language is often held out as a kind of boundary over and past which the signs of art "speak", that is, meaningfully reach beyond...Art practice is language dependent in the sense that most cognitive practices are language dependent. Certainly as language dependent as any other practice into which the practitioners, managers, teachers, aficionados, etc. contribute an audible/visible input
by virtue of what they write/speak into that practice. This seems an incontrovertible condition of exchange in art practice. I am hard put to think of any cognitive, or even purely technical practice which is not significantly language dependent. Language using is a form of life. The public practice of art making is not instead of language using, it is not either an extension of it, but a significant part of that form of life. [6]

More generally, "literacy" is a word that implies a reflexive awareness of language, and an ability to read and write. Since "the visual" is not coterminous with the textual, to refer to a literacy of the visual realm is to deploy an analogy fraught with contradictions. In recognition of this Nelson Goodman begins his Languages of Art by pointing out that in his title "Languages"...should, strictly, be replaced by "symbol systems"." Such terminological caution is not pedantry but rigour. [7]

The critic and educationalist Andrew Brighton has been outspoken on the matter of the relevance and importance of literacy with respect to art teaching:

To make an obvious point that seems to go unnoticed, the predominant medium of art school teaching is words, it is a discursive practice. The value of the artist as teacher is presumably that they can communicate their grasp of the complexity of art utterances by discursive example. Tutoring people making art is tutoring people in ways of thinking about art...one of the things I most consistently find is an incapacity of art students to read their own work and the work of others. They are not equipped to think their way into the actuality of a work. We now have a situation where many recent graduates of any half-alive art history department have a more literate and imaginative understanding of past and contemporary practice than most art school graduates behind whose thin visual practice stands the common sense of the studios. The underdeveloped discursive culture of art in English art schools culturally disempowers students...I think our notion of the artist is too anti-academic and too market influenced...My point is that inasmuch as art school studio common sense teaches a theory of no theory it is not self-aware; it takes its own assumptions as self evident truths. [8]

Some of what Brighton says here is reinforced by what Atkinson writes at the beginning of his essay "Phantoms of the Studio":

No matter how much theory is disguised or repressed, there is no practice without theory. The theory that practice has nothing to do with theory is a theory, a disingenuous and naive one, but none the less a theory. Reading works of art is dependent...upon reading in general. This may seem obvious in a wider intellectual context, but it is noted here in respect of the resistance to such ideas in the art school ambience." [9]

I have written above, and quoted at some length about the problems surrounding the term "visual language". I want to now go on to look at some other ways in which one might think of the related but by no means identical expression "visual literacy", which is effectively what the passage from Brighton was alluding to.

One approach to "visual literacy" might take it to be a competence which, whilst not strictly linguistic, relies heavily upon language, as with Brighton's view of art teaching, for its operation. Writing in 1964 Barthes proposed that "...we are, much more than in former times,
and despite the spread of pictorial illustration, a civilisation of the written word." [10] Barthes' argument, that meaning is always directed in some measure through language, is an influential one, and is echoed in the writings of theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and many others. Language was the major twentieth-century paradigm not only for Structuralist and Poststructuralist thought, but for philosophy (Wittgenstein), psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), literature (Joyce and Roussel's emphases on the materiality of language), as well as for, if sometimes indirectly, the visual arts. The major artistic groups of the last century produced manifestos as an important part of their work. Dada and Surrealist practice was heavily indebted to the written word, and Duchamp's Large Glass was accompanied by a box of notes critical to the reading of the piece; his emphatic wordplay, much influenced by, again, Roussel, is itself well known. In the 1960s and 1970s artists en masse began to think of language itself as a medium out of which they might fabricate an art practice. Conceptual Art to a large degree focused attention upon the institutional, linguistically determined formation of the category of "art" itself, and whilst artists continued to make objects that could, ultimately, be reproduced or reconstructed in galleries, a significant number used language as a means of analysing art and its constituencies (and not merely as a new art material). Kosuth, Buren, Smithson and Art & Language amongst others produced numerous critical writings for the art press; indeed A&L established their own journal, Art-Language, in 1969. Beuys presented lengthy lectures, the implication of which was, as with the work of A&L, that the discussion around the work was at least as important as the physical artwork, when such existed, itself. The legacy of Conceptual Art is in strong evidence today amongst the practices of a younger generation of artists, and even those notoriously ant-intellectual practitioners working within and on the borders of "Brit Art" rely upon the dominance of language in order to reject it as part of their piously defiant pose. [11]

There is still, in spite of Brit Art's success in the marketplace, a current orthodoxy of art schools claiming to want to integrate theory with practice, the art history presentations with the studio work. It would be interesting to examine how successful such proposals actually are. Art school studio staff often remain, as has been implied elsewhere within this essay, strictly antagonistic to theory.

Yet another way of approaching the issue of visual literacy is to think of the phrase as indicative not of a strictly linguistic bias within the production and reception of art, but instead at a more general level, bracketing the looseness of the term in order to think about what it might plausibly refer to. Richard Wollheim has suggested that:

In creating...forms the artist is operating inside a continuing activity or enterprise, and this enterprise has its own repertoire, imposes its own stringencies, offers its own opportunities, and thereby provides occasions, inconceivable outside it, for invention and audacity. [12]

To read "literacy" as being an idea applicable within the zone of Wollheim's "enterprise" would be to imply the presence of a set of competencies pertinent to the practice of producing art. The "visually literate" artist would be, in this example, someone familiar with the history of art (if only somewhat), whose own work might possibly refer to other art objects, styles, and arguments in circulation within, and in part defining, what Arthur Danto famously termed, in 1964, the "Artworld". [13] Artists and art students are often unable to verbally articulate the issues with which they are concerned, yet they make objects
significant to relations within, and which go some way towards determining what we accept as "contemporary art". This "intuitive" approach, even if I am giving it the status of a type of literacy, might nevertheless benefit from being subjected to an extended analysis of a kind that it is not possible to carry out here.

Continuing with this expanded use of the term "literacy", one might employ it in relation to other participants in the form of life labelled "art". I refer to art historians, critics, dealers, curators and others who comprise the artworld, but also to the art-appreciating public, i.e. collectors, "art lovers" and students of art. What competencies are necessitated by an interest in art? How is the category "art" defined and defended, indeed constructed by the practitioners, consumers, and institutions of art (art schools, galleries, advisory bodies, journals, books and catalogues, and the media generally)? In connection with these contexts and questions the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Taylor are worthy of serious attention. [14]

The above paragraphs focus upon issues of literacy and the dominance of language, and make passing reference to the determining institutions of art, its places of reference and dissemination. Neglected so far in these remarks is the matter of the "visual literacy" of art's audience, a theme which may be divided into several areas:

A. The presentation of art and artists in the mass media, and how media images of art are understood by a non-specialist audience.

B. Types of visual literacy, i.e. does the "literacy" of the artist differ from that of his/her audience? If so, in what ways? And where are historians, critics, curators, etc. placed in terms of this spectrum of competency/visual literacy?

C. What is the common level of "visual literacy" in culture? What skills are required? What knowledge and abilities are necessary for the decoding and interpretation of advertisements, images in magazines, on television and in the cinema, these being the dominant visual media of capitalist culture? And is the "literacy" necessitated by, for example, a pop video, equally applicable when one is confronted with a painting, installation or piece of performance art? How does "visual literacy" differ in (and in fact effect) different levels of culture, and what forms and patterns does it take and make across diverse cultures and historical periods?

I have indicated some of the attitudes frequently held by artists towards critics, and tried to map out potential areas of "visually literacy", as opposed to "visual language". I want now to present some examples of critical positions taken by those who write about artists and their work. There are four kinds of criticism to which I will give my attention here:

1. The first of these might be described as prescriptive or dogmatic criticism. Two examples of well-known critics who might be placed within this category are Clement Greenberg and Peter Fuller.

Greenberg's approach involved the promotion of specific values at the expense of other concerns, something which is of course inevitable but which was, in this writer's case, rather extreme. Emphasising "truth to the medium" as a prime requisite for artistic practice, painters were encouraged by Greenberg to make work in which the flatness of the canvas or other support was made clearly apparent, any illusion or representation of three-dimensionality
being strictly not the order of the day. A further form of evaluation in Greenberg’s critical project involved the question of “quality”, an attribute the supposed workings of which owed much to the aesthetic theories of the philosopher Kant. In Greenberg’s transcription of Kant the existential, retinal-related experience of the sensuous surface of painting took precedence over the cognitive to an astonishingly severe degree. [15]

In the case of Peter Fuller, the focus fell upon a peculiarly reductive notion of “British” art, and upon practices said to embody universally vivid subject matter. Fuller promoted “the haptic” and the expressive, calling up birth, death, pain, anxiety and love as the only proper referential content of art. His compressed “Marxist” ravings left no room for alternative accounts of practice or of the social function of art. Anything not complying with this paradigm was ignored or forced, by a deliberate distortion, to fit this too-restrictive frame (the sensuous but simultaneously “cool” surfaces of Jasper Johns’ paintings, for example).

The word “prescriptive” is appropriate because these two critics “laid down the law” for future practice, as if to say that art was this and this, and could not be anything else. Not content with attending to work already in existence, a stipulation of aesthetic propriety was made, cancelling diversity, deviation and imagination in advance of their possible appearance.

Future practice was, as it were, bullied into shape before it had even stepped onto the stage.

2. The writers associated with the American critical theory journal October - Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier and Rosalind Krauss, and others - represent a more overtly theorised form of critical practice than either Greenberg or Fuller. Their writings utilise a combination of Marxist, psychoanalytical and Poststructuralist theories to assemble a kind of criticism which reflects, as part of its project, on its own nature as criticism, as well as working to debunk or rewrite mainstream art historical accounts. [16]

In his 1963 essay “What Is Criticism?”, Roland Barthes argued that it was the job of criticism to not only examine a given aesthetic object but, simultaneously, to hold an awareness of its own ideological position and limitations. This self-conscious approach is that of the writers associated with October too. Foster, has remarked that theory should be thought of as a toolbox of possible methods of analysis, with individual “tools” being tested against the object under its interrogator's gaze. Any pretence at objectivity is thus abandoned, the chosen methodology being openly displayed. [17]

3. A third model of critical practice involves the critic taking a work of art as a point of departure for a more or less autonomous act of writing. Oscar Wilde proposed this position in “The Critic as Artist” (1890), and a contemporary example of this approach can be found, according to Thomas McEvilley, in the work of Stuart Morgan. [18]

Morgan does though keep in mind the artists he’s writing in relation to, not simply abandoning his initial “trigger” point, even if he manages to gather together and extend a wide number of tangential threads.

Writing in 1980 in her obituary of Barthes, Susan Sontag described how Barthes had appeared to be able to take anything, any object, book or image, and make of it an intelligently sensuous text:
One felt that he could generate ideas about anything. Put him in front of a cigar box and he would have one, two, many ideas – a little essay. It was not a question of knowledge (he couldn’t have known much about some of the subjects he wrote about) but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what could be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention. [19]

Although normally described as a literary critic or commentator, Barthes, and others like him, shift the practice of the critic into another domain, blurring the boundary between the position of artist and critic to a point at which the conventional hierarchy of practices becomes unstable. McEvilley is keen to emphasise that such an elision is especially evident within the genre of art criticism:

Art criticism is really its own genre of literature, not exactly following the rules of any other. By its privileged position in between art, philosophy, philology, poetry, essay-writing, society, and other things, criticism is a specially versatile area in which an individual writer can mark out his or her turf in any number of ways. [20]

4. The final type of criticism I want to mention here is that of artists as critics. Art practice is implicitly, it might be argued, a form of criticism, since each practice, even each individual work of art constitutes or carries within itself a critical commentary upon, or dialogue with earlier works of art. [21] A mirror to this position is that of those artists who have explicitly worked as critics – Laurie Anderson, Patrick Heron, Donald Judd and Adrian Searle are just a few examples. [22]

It is of course also the case that many artists, whilst not claiming to be critics as such, have produced substantial bodies of written work. Some well-known twentieth-century practitioners who have done this are Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian, Schwitters, Smithson and Stella, but there are many others. Journals such as Art-Language had several precedents in the form of publications issued by artists involved with the De Stijl, Dada, and Surrealist groups. Today the tradition of the artist-initiated publication is continued with Everything magazine, based in London, and Variant, formed in Glasgow in the 1980s and still published there today. [23]

Having begun this paper with reference to an absence of definition, I will conclude it with a few lines about the function - or functions - of the art critic. An important aspect of the critic’s job is explicatory, and this is so whether or not the audience is a lay or specialist one. It is also incumbent upon the critic to offer an analysis, or at least an informed account of the work being addressed. Finding a means of doing these things may well necessitate the invention or adaptation of a vocabulary that is appropriate to the task at hand.

The critic may be either “for” or “against” a particular aesthetic ethos or body of work, but hopefully his or her concerns will be in some way helpful to artists. Roberta Smith, The New York Times' senior visual arts critic proposes that the critic’s function might be viewed from another angle: “If you’re going to be a critic”, she says, “it’s very important to have that sense that you’re writing for viewers. You’re on the front line of the viewing audience. You’re a professional; your main job is to record your reactions as honestly as possible, not to be an advocate for artists.” [24] Such a stance is far removed from that of the artist who only looks to critics for what he or she might gain from their unswerving, relentlessly sympathetic attention.

Notes

1. More generally, artists appear to think of critics as servants or attendants, an attitude alluded to in the title of Stuart Morgan's anthology What the Butler Saw, Durian Publications, undated but published in 1996. Oscar Wilde's reference to the vanity of artists who "seem to imagine that the primary function of the critic is to chatter about their second-rate work" is also appropriate here. See Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", included in G. F. Maine (Ed.) The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, 1949, p. 967.

The presumptions of artists to which I allude might be, in the art schools, challenged and redefined if the issue of how visual works of art were impinged upon by language was more frequently and rigorously raised and debated than it is, one suspects, at the present time. Although I cite encounters with particular individuals it should be emphasised that the assumptions I discuss are only local examples of a very widespread way of thinking about criticism and the critic, both within and outside of art educational contexts.

2. Andrew Graham-Dixon, Howard Hodgkin, Thames and Hudson, 1994. Even when the phrase "visual language" is not used there is reference to the projected verbosity of paintings: "It is a picture that speaks of..." (p. 8); "...the language of his art..." (p. 13); "...the language of figurative art..." (p. 40); "...Hodgkin's own language..." (p. 57); "...phrased in the visual language of collage..." (p. 94); "...unsaturated colours and a visual language..." (p. 117), and so on, ad nauseam.


8. Andrew Brighton, "Art education and the scrutineers", in Paul Hetherington (Ed.), Artists in the 1990s, Tate Gallery/Wimbledon School of Art, 1994, pp. 37 - 38. In a recent interview Brian Eno expressed the following point about artists and articulacy: "I don't see why it should be considered incompatible with being a good artist that you might be articulate as well, I take that as a part of the job. If you ask me a question about what I'm doing, I want to be able to tell you, at least, this is what I think I'm doing, this is how I'm doing it, and this is why I'm excited about it." Michael Bracewell/Brian Eno. "Musical Chairs", The Sunday Herald, 20th May 2000. These words should be inscribed above the entrances to all art schools.


11. For a series of remarks upon Brit Art with respect to the field of art education see: Peter Suchin, "Resonant Fields: a Context for Magnetic", in Mark Wilson (Ed.), Magnetic (exhibition catalogue), Webster University, St. Louis (U.S.A.) and tour, 1998; Peter Suchin, "After a Fashion: Regress as Progress in Contemporary British Art", in Duncan McCorquodale et al (Eds.), Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art, Black Dog, 1998; Peter Suchin, "The Rise and Demise of the "yBa": Reference and Revolt in Recent British Art", in Krzysztof Knauer and Simon Murray (Eds.), Britishness and Cultural Studies Continuity and Change in Narrating the Nation, Slask (Poland), 2000.


14. See, amongst other works by Bourdieu, his Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Harvard University Press, 1984. Roger Taylor's Art, an Enemy of the People (Harvester Press, 1978) is his most sustained critique of the institution of art. Jean Gimpel's The Cult of Art, also of relevance here, was first published in English by Weidenfeld & Nicholson in 1969. Research as to what the term "visual literacy" is understood to mean has recently been carried out by Karen Raney in a project funded jointly by the Arts Council of England and Middlesex University. Raney has written about her research in her "Framing visual and verbal experience", included in Round Midnight 2, distributed with the December 1996 issue of Artists Newsletter. For a development of some of the points in the present paper, with particular reference to fine art teaching, see Peter Suchin, "Literacy, criticism and fine art", also published in Round Midnight 2. G. L. Hagberg's Art as Language, Cornell University Press, 1995, examines the philosophical literature concerned with the belief that art is, or can function as, a language.
I am aware that Greenberg’s work has been the subject of a radical reassessment in recent years. See Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*, Dis Voir, 1996.

For an example of an essay by Buchloh which offers an unconventional reading of the ideology of expression, see his “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, *October*, No. 16, Spring 1981.


The present writer is both a critic and a painter.

The catalogue for the exhibition *Life/Live*, Musee d’art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1996 (2 vols) contains a section documenting then current British art journals, a number of which are edited and produced by artists.


**Ghosting and Greasing: Terry Atkinson’s "Disaffirmative" Art**

*Nigel Whiteley (Ed.), De-Traditionalisation and Art: Aesthetic, Authority, Authenticity, London, 2001*

It is often the case that artists who are also writers or, writers who are also visual artists, find themselves more recognised for one or other of these creative concerns but not for the combination of the two. In the case of Terry Atkinson the border between his two major areas of involvement as a painter and as a writer of critical texts is somewhat more nebulously drawn. Atkinson's artistic practice, most unusually, it must be noted, is an explicitly theorised practice, one in which the two ostensibly distinct areas of theory and practice are combined in an attempt to form a rigorously critical, yet artistically open mode of work. Further, as a Marxist Atkinson is concerned with the production of a form of artistic work the aim of which is to disturb the conventional beliefs, aspirations, ideologies and techniques upon which most affirmative capitalist art depends. Ironically, it is a matter of acting to de-traditionalise a body of conventions and concerns that are already undergoing an immanent de-traditionalisation.

In his 1987 essay "Predicament" Atkinson made the following remark:

> The possibility of making an affirmative culture today seems to me to be...absurd. The world's dominant political systems are prurient, self-regarding and barbarously repressive. Any cultural work that celebrates such a world - intentionally or not - that holds uncritically to the status quo of the relations of production and relations of distribution can be seen to have, on rudimentary historical reflection, a carefree charlatanism or - in a harsher judgement - a grotesque negligence. [1]
Atkinson hopes, then, to generate a kind of art practice that he has termed "disaffirmative", one which seeks to destroy, not to maintain, current dominant forms of life. This intention is not merely one of artistic "consumer choice" in which one selects, as an artist, to do this or that kind of work, take on one or another of the currently prominent "styles". It is, rather, a matter of the gravest importance. Within capitalist culture, proposes Atkinson, "To go on practising art is a predicament or it is nothing." It is, he suggests, "...a predicament where he difficulties thrown up direct all other operations." [2]

Part of the predicament to which Atkinson makes reference has roots in the grotesque situation of the legacy of Modernism. Now that Modernism has entered the museum and has become a part of the very tradition it was once antagonistic towards, the would-be critical artist is required to take a stance against this somewhat expanded legacy by steering his or her practice into considerably stormy waters. If a critique of art is now a part of the accepted canon handed down to the practitioner an effective challenge to the tradition cannot be expected to emerge from within that tradition itself. What is needed is a means of destabilising the legacy, shifting the terrain of the debate. If holding to the tradition is a means of keeping things in place any critical practice worthy of the name must involve actions and emphases designed to "de-traditionalise" the tradition. Nineteenth and twentieth century art has thrown up a host of difficulties for the artist. The art institution remains, however, firmly in place, as does the fiction of the artist as an extra-sensitive, highly centred subject. It is a necessary and pressing task that the critical artist debunk, reformulate and leave open to question traditional notions of art and the artist. Anything less than such a move merely reaffirms the status and role of art within capitalist culture and, by extension, that culture itself.

Born in Thurscoe, Yorkshire, in 1939, Atkinson studied first at the local art school then at the Slade in London, going on in the late 1960s to become a founder member of Art & Language, a group of artist-theorists who were amongst the few important instigators within Britain of that form of critical art practice that has come to be called "conceptual art". [3] With the increasing prominence of this novel approach to artistic practice a number of changes within the framing and understanding of art took place. As Atkinson himself has noted, art practice became "complex and expanded" [4], to the point at which the erstwhile conventional parameters of art were completely overthrown. Part of this expansion of the concept and physical manifestation of art led straight into - or perhaps directly out from the somewhat intense discussions within and around schools of art as to the nature of art itself. Art & Language were a prominent force of influence as regards this shift of focus, from the physical art object to the institutional, theoretical definition of art's form and status within western culture. Within this shift debates about the relations between theory and practice took on a major force, the discussions about art being regarded as at least as important as, if not more important than the physical artwork itself. Certainly, within the Art & Language group this was very much the case.

One part of this discussion, and an important one, involved a radical critique of prominent artworld cliches, such as the spurious known as "visual language" or "visual thinking". Employing the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Marx, Engels and many others Art & Language asked questions of the numerous uncritically received ideas in circulation about art and the artist. Such untheorised, "traditional" beliefs, models for the behaviour of the artist still enforced today, continue to receive attacks from certain attentive quarters, including Atkinson himself.
In 1985 Atkinson was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, one of Britain's most prestigious artworld awards. It was made clear at the time that this nomination was not made merely with respect to Atkinson's direct contribution to visual art but with reference too to his writings, as well as for his work as a teacher. Scattered throughout the pages of exhibition catalogues, contributions to books and journals Atkinson's writings together present a complicated and penetrating account of art world mores, an analysis of that subcultural sphere's behaviour as difficult it is to summarise as it is far reaching. In the present essay I intend to concentrate my attention upon only the most prominent issues raised within these critical texts. In a recent issue of the journal Art Monthly Atkinson has published a short essay in which he proposes that:

...the dominant construction of artistic subjectivity and identity is a Cartesian one. This model, with its frame of inner and outer, where the inner is considered as the authentic, or at least the more authentic sphere, is a primary cause of the unwarranted special pleading for the sensitivity of the artistic subject. Tied to it I think is the prioritising of something the art milieu widely calls "feeling" over something it calls "thinking". This is a classical dualism. The hegemony of "the visual" is also intimately linked to this dualism. The still-dominant model of the artist as a "feeler" rather than a "thinker" is exemplified in thousands of art school conversations every day. Such a model is a kind of subjective lock-out, prioritising introspection over public exchange...While it might be relatively easy to reproach an artist...for not thinking clearly it is pretty strange to try and reproach them for not feeling clearly. [5]

Atkinson goes on to point out that it is the orthodoxy in art schools to hold the insupportable belief that one can be a "feeler" without being a "thinker" and that, furthermore, "not only should the artist be a "feeler" but that he/she is a better artist if he/she is not a thinker." [6] Feeling is widely held to be a more democratic attribute than thinking and this, one supposes, forms a part of its appeal. The dualism feeling/thinking is part of a more broader panoply of central art school beliefs, the most central of which, in terms of its pernicious influential effect, is the chimera of "visual language". In art schools and in the artworld generally "the notion of an unmediated "visual language" is still a widely canvassed one...There more than anywhere the shift to the world of the instincts which has gathered momentum from the time of Romanticism has become dogmatically entrenched." [7] The rest of the paragraph is worth quoting in full:

The notion of a distinctive "visual language" is founded upon the realm of the instincts. This is a "language", it is alleged, of unmediated instinctual access, which in turn assumes language itself to be transparent in the sense of it being merely a medium in which individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things. The notion of "visual language" is a kind of common sense still central to the dominant discourse in art schools. By common sense discourse I mean any discourse which demands to be easily read and is therefore compelled to reproduce its most familiar assumptions and values. To challenge familiar assumptions and values by staying within them is impossible. [8]

The argument outlined in the essay from which this extract is taken, the aptly-titled "Phantoms of the Studio", is a long and convoluted one and I do not intend to summarise it here. In it some effort is made to come to terms with the history of the ideology of the artistic subject as special person, a kind of paradigm for the orthodox western definition of the self.
In the west the model of the self is a form of selfhood thought to be occupied by the artist, who is regarded as "an ideologically unyoked, centred subject." It's a model that's steeped in the ideology of the natural rather than in those theories of the constructed, fluid, relatively mobile subject offered to us in recent years by writers such as Foucault, Kristeva, Barthes and Lacan. Connected with this old conception of the fixed, centred subject is the belief in something known as expressive realism. This again goes back to Romanticism. What it is important to note here is that this whole set of ideologically-loaded markers outline a somewhat fictitious, yet extremely well-entrenched picture of the artist as some kind of unquestionably authentic self. This more than extra-special self is an expert in expression, taking that last term to stand for the unrestrained outpourings of emotions, moods and nuances, in short "feelings" and certainly not thoughts.

Peter Fuller was one art critic, perhaps the most notorious but certainly not the only example, who spent much of his time pushing the belief that the job of the fine artist was simply to express, turning in the process his or her ever-so-special feelings into material expressions which took the form of paintings, sculptures and other conventional artworld objects. Fuller's popularity, in part supported through the journal he founded, Modern Painters, was considerable. Fuller called himself a Marxist and argued that conceptual art was the outcome of bourgeois culture's nonsensical, idiosyncratic misreading of tradition, a deviation away from the mainstream rather than a legitimate reworking - or a refusal - of past art. Art students, not conventionally known for their serious interest in reading, actually appeared to subscribe to Fuller's magazine, taking its overly narrow values as some kind of transcendental truth. It is against such dogmatic demands for a return to tradition as voiced by Fuller and his supporters that Atkinson's attacks on visual language and its advocates can be seen to be acting to "de-traditionalise" the practice, and reception of contemporary art.

The shift into the field of attitudes and forms that subsequently became known as conceptual art began to take hold, as I have mentioned above, in the 1960s. By 1980 there was already a call for a retreat - a "return to painting" as it was then put - to more conventional art making, consumption and distribution. From a situation in which it seemed that virtually anything could be art the artworld moved into a period of demands for a return to "proper" painting and sculpture. This insistence was voiced as though art objects were just the natural excretion of the super-sensitive artist, and the call for a return suggested a deviation from a timeless body of truths - let us call this body "tradition" - a deviation which could easily be suppressed if traditional skills and beliefs were once again respected by artists. What Fuller and others failed to recognise was that traditions can be, and are, made and unmade, assembled and pulled apart through time. Fuller's model of what art should be was prescriptive. He just somehow knew (it appeared) what exactly art was and his work was by and large given over to reinstating the practices and concerns he insisted should be in place. Here is part of what Atkinson wrote in relation to Fuller in "Remarks from Hindsight":

Recently the idea of novelty has been under heavy attack. The claims of this attack are that it produces trite and trivial work. Peter Fuller has gone about as far as anyone in this respect. The general antidote to this alleged triviality has been a recommendation of a return to old training programmes, particularly to the ancient skills, drawing, carving and modelling. Correspondingly there seems to have also been a return to traditional content, Fuller having gone on to suggest there is a quasi-
biological basis for a certain range of themes as a kind of match for the re-establishment [of] "ancient" skills. [10]

It is acknowledged by Atkinson a couple of pages further along that the promotion of novelty - the near-obsession with this in the 1970s, in fact - did often lead to trivial and as it were meaningless work being produced. But Atkinson suggests that this in itself is not a convincing argument for an unquestioned return to traditional practice:

Whilst it is true that the avant-garde embrace for the theory of novelty led to a profusion of trivial and jejune work, a blanket return to old orders is no opening up of expressivist possibilities - on the contrary, it is a closure of pragmatic possibility. The idea of "newness", of "freshness" of perspective, is important. [11]

It is taken to be the case by Atkinson that critics such as Fuller, together with those administrators, tutors and students who supported a return to tradition, helped to keep art students both inarticulate and quiescent. By "inarticulate" Atkinson is suggesting that art students found (and find) themselves in a position in which they agree, in essence, to have experts (such as Fuller) speak on their behalf. By "quiescent" what Atkinson means is that artists agree with the establishment view of his or her status and role, and with the relevant components of the educational and distributive apparatuses. [12]

The status given to "visual language" is a major tool in the promotion of quiescent, inarticulate students, and this is one reason why it is such an important target for criticism. Atkinson emphasises that "...of all the phantoms of the studio...the notion of visual language, anchored as it is in the discourse of authentic inwardness...is perhaps the most haunting and reactionary one." [13]

Clearly, there is a strong interrelation between Atkinson's role as a fine art tutor and his writings. His approach is part of a way of teaching that accepts, indeed it emphasises, as does his practice as a whole, the relations between language and visual art. One is reminded of observations on teaching uttered by Andrew Brighton at a recently-held conference at London's Tate Gallery:

To make an obvious point that seems to go unnoticed, the predominant medium of art school teaching is words, it is a discursive practice. The value of the artist as teacher is presumably that they can communicate their grasp of the complexity of art utterances by discursive example. Tutoring people making art is tutoring people in ways of thinking about art...one of the things I most consistently find is an incapacity of art students to read their own work and the work of others. They are not equipped to think their way into the actuality of a work. We now have a situation where many recent graduates of any half-alive art history department have a more literate and imaginative understanding of past and contemporary practice than most art school graduates behind whose thin visual practice stands the common sense of the studios. The underdeveloped discursive culture of art in English art schools culturally disempowers students...I think our notion of the artist is too anti-academic and too market influenced...My point is that inasmuch as art school studio common sense teaches a theory of no theory it is not self-aware; it takes its own assumptions as self evident truths. [14]

And as Atkinson insists at the beginning of "Phantoms...":
No matter how much theory is disguised or repressed, there is no practice without theory. The theory that practice has nothing to do with theory is a theory, a disingenuous and naive one, but none the less a theory. [15]

This refusal to abandon theory is critical, all the more so at a time when young contemporary British artists and their defenders are purporting to put theory to one side in a supposed "attack" upon the institutionalisation of theory-led work. But theory, in the sense of a body of coherent but developing, explicitly-voiced concerns regarding the production and dissemination of the art objects one chooses to make, cannot ever really be absent. If one isn't holding to an explicit of ideas about one's work one can be sure, all the same, that the formulations and seemingly innate or natural "talents" forming one's paradigm of aesthetic practice have a history that is in no way neutral or unique.

I have been at pains to stress the importance of theory in Atkinson's teaching and practice, since this is no mere "interest" but a fundamental element of this artist's work. I want now to move on to a discussion of actual examples of Atkinson's painterly practice, looking at several different styles or approaches within his now very considerable body of work.

The first group of paintings executed by Atkinson after departing from Art & Language involved both a deliberate move to distance himself from the then central concerns of that group's practice, and an attempt to deal with, through the medium of painting, a range of issues, including the transmission of historical events. The possibility (or not) of making contemporary form of history painting, bourgeois conventions of "good" and "bad" drawing, and the matter of the relations between image and text. Several other aspects of practice were also explored in the work, notably the question of whether or not it is possible to construct a didactic, rigorously theorised, Marxist art practice.

Taking as his point of departure the "return to painting" so prominent at the end of the 1970s and during the early '80s, Atkinson decided to himself return to painting after a break of some years. However Atkinson's concern was consciously constructed as a parody of the market-led move back to painting so much in vogue at the time. Working across a range of traditional media - oil and acrylic paints, pencil, conte, chalk and so on, and using he supports of canvas and paper, the images produced were largely derived from incidents within, and first hand accounts of, World War 1. Atkinson had involved himself in substantial research, not only during visits to the Imperial War Museum but also by carrying out a large number of interviews with surviving war veterans. In many cases Atkinson worked from photographs taken during the war, thus adding one more intervening layer of mediation between himself and the actual physical events depicted. Ironic, extensive titles acted as foils to the images, anchoring each of these to a particular event or historical moment but also raising questions about the transmission of historical data. The titles also called up for consideration a concern with the rights and wrongs of academically-transmitted drawing skills, something which, in terms of the actual depiction of figures, objects and contexts was evident in the very way the marks of paint and pencil had been worked. A single title will have to serve as an example here: "Picture with botched-up drawing depicting British proletarians attacking German proletarians, both sets of proletarians defending the interests of their respective capitalisms" of 1981 [16] is a text which raises the question of technical competence and also points to the class-related nature of the First World War. The main figure in the work, a British soldier, is drawn, it would seem, in an intentionally clumsy manner. What is the status of technical competence as employed in this drawing? To
describe within its very title a picture as being "botched-up" suggests that the work is in fact not botched but deliberately made to look that way. Or, at least, if the actual drawing was in the first instance "botched", does calling it "botched-up" mean that Atkinson actually considers this description to be accurate? If the piece was genuinely a failure one presumes that it would not be shown. Choosing to employ “botched-up” (re)frames the work, shifting the matter of technical ability into another mode.

I once heard Atkinson remark, during a discussion of L S Lowry's "matchstick men" figures, that Lowry had been a student at the Slade, and that one didn't get into that particular academy without being able to draw in a manner conventionally accepted as competent. Lowry's "incompetence" was deliberate, a chosen way of signifying figures, not an indication of an inability to make conventional drawings. [17] Atkinson himself had attended the Slade, and one assumes the same criteria had held out, so the suggestion that Atkinson was inadvertently botching his work doesn't look plausible. In any case, the whole area of technique and the matter of what was and wasn't appropriate vis-a-vis skill within art had been up for discussion at least since artists such as Duchamp and Arp had utilised chance in the making of their works.

From another angle the World War 1 works operated as a kind of Brechtian critique of conventional practice. The title-texts acted, in Atkinson's own phrase, as "semantic pathways" [18] into the visual, historical and ideological interests surrounding, and in a certain sense comprising the work. In short, the World War 1 pictures raise a wide range of questions about the traditions inherent in bourgeois art. They operate in a manner that disturbs the tradition or canon, all the more so because of their apparent closeness to it.

Two or three years after ceasing to work on the First World War (and related) images a new series of Atkinson's images was exhibited under the rubric of the "Happy Snap" pictures. These again utilised conventional artistic materials, whilst referring to the immense effects of war, and also to Atkinson's own family, placed within the space of the canvas via translations of photographs taken by Atkinson himself. Here were indexed to the paintings subjects such as autobiography, the nuclear family and a perverse and disturbing tourism relating to military mass graves. It was at this point that a concern with what Adorno had called the "culture industry" [19] began to surface in Atkinson's practice. More tourism pictures followed, strange depictions of Sue, Ruby and Amber (Atkinson's wife and daughters) wandering through the now-commodified, seemingly refurbished remains of the death camps.

These gradual transformations in Atkinson's making of work, the situation of even continuing to practice art at all in a culture about which Adorno had made his famous remark decrying the possibility of poetry "after Auschwitz" [20] bears out a notion of de-traditionalisation in art, not only because the belief in a coherent tradition seems increasingly insubstantial in our culture, but also because Atkinson is clearly making work in a manner antagonistic to the currents and centre-stage conceptions of "traditional" art. He has employed the accepted legacy of bourgeois art against the very validity that such art had been attempting to maintain. Distorted drawing, the ramming together of witty if sometimes distressing titles with ostensibly mute visual works supposedly encoded in "visual language", and the refusal to accept the untheorised cliche that history painting is no longer a plausible artistic form in a world packed with cameras and photographs: all these and other elements of the work Atkinson made in the years following his departure from Art & Language (as well as the work
he made with A&L itself) point to an intention to destabilise those authorities invested in orthodox artworld formations.

Another, again different series of works was shown by Atkinson in 1987. These were a number of pieces on themes pertaining to the situation in Northern Ireland. In terms of techniques of their construction these "fake" abstract pictures pushed Atkinson's travestying of the conventions of realism and, more broadly, of Modernist abstraction to new and more audacious lengths, a pattern of production again taken up in the two most recently completed collections of works I am to discuss in the remainder of this essay.

These two series, one following on from the other, have been called by Atkinson the "Grease" series and the "Enola Gay" series. Both groups, particularly the former, owe something to Atkinson's interest in the writings of T J Clark. Atkinson has commented during discussions of his practice [21] upon how he had, with the World War 1 pictures, sometimes produced an image in order to accompany a caption he'd thought up, rather than first making an image and then supplying it with a title. Similarly, in making a sequence of constructions deploying the somewhat unusual material of axle grease Atkinson had been attempting to make a kind of "painting" complicit with a number of ideas and theories generated by his reading of writings by, amongst others, Clark, Benjamin and Adorno. It wasn't a question of illustrating the ideas Atkinson happened to be reading at the time. Rather, it was the case that Atkinson, as at earlier moments of his practice, was looking for a means with which to disturb the conventions of art-making as they stood at a particular moment within capitalist culture. This approach is one which reverses the normal Modernist "silent" and "blind" (that is, untheorised) making of visual work. It is a question, with Atkinson, not of what he might feel he wishes he needs to express (Atkinson's practice is not "expressive" in any usual sense of the word), but of selecting subjects, fashions and received ideas which he considers it necessary to confront. This is one example of how it is that Atkinson's practice is, as I have called it above, explicitly theorised or theory-led.

At this point I should emphasise that despite his concern to keep his practice an at least partially open project Atkinson's work operates within the boundaries of an attempt at a realism of sorts. [22] It's a realism that comes from a seeking after historical truth, and one of the imperatives buried - but I do not mean lost - within Atkinson's work is that he is running a type of metacritique of current or recent styles of art. His work is thus not "political art" as such, but a commentary upon the very idea of a politically-franchised practice. Atkinson's work politicises aesthetics rather than reversing that notable proposal.

The grease paintings and constructions - structures half way between painting and sculpture in fact - directly address the question of what it might mean to push the conventions of modernist art practice to a new extreme. In making these pieces Atkinson put together a number of large but shallow assemblages of wood, metal and other materials, each containing a trough into which was smeared a quantity of axle grease. This substance was also allowed, in some cases, to spread onto other parts of the construction, contrasting with the no doubt deliberately pretty, technically neat slats of wood and the other various surfaces that made up the individual works. Warhol Greaser 1 of 1987 is one example. It carries a crudely-outlined drawing of a Warhol electric chair, a reference to, amongst other things, that artist's status as one-time transgressor of Modernist aesthetic norms. Grease is a material with working class connotations as well as calling to mind the multinational oil companies. It is also a substance which never completely dries. This intermediate state - between liquid
and solid - also holds a number of other connotations: the fat employed in the work of Joseph Beuys being perhaps the most obvious. [24]. Then there is the idea of, to paraphrase Atkinson, "greasing the practice". One might multiply indefinitely the objects, conditions and references to which the use of grease might refer. [25]

In an essay first published in 1982 and modified in 1984 [26] T J Clark referred to a series of transgressive actions, ways of working employed by a number of nineteenth and twentieth century artists. These he termed "practices of negation". He offers a definition of this phrase:

"By "practice of negation" I meant some form of decisive innovation, in method or materials or imagery, whereby a previously established set of skills or frame of reference - skills and references which up till then had been taken as essential to art-making of any seriousness - are deliberately avoided or travestied, in such a way as to imply that only by such incompetence or obscurity will genuine picturing get done."

Clark is proposing that the temporal and aesthetic zone of practice that is Modernism can be read as a set of "moves" in which the introduction into art of new materials, subjects and resources of expression is a characteristic strategy. Each new move serves to negate the previously fixed limit point of established convention. In his essay "Disaffirmation and Negation" Atkinson lists these practices of negation as follows. [28] There is some overlap between the discrete items on the list:

1. The various attacks on centred and legible composition.
2. Distortion or reversal of perspectival space.
3. The refusal of simple equivalences between particular aspects of representation and aspects of the thing they represent.
4. Deliberate displays of painterly awkwardness.
5. Facility in kinds of painting that were not supposed to be worth perfecting.
6. Primitivism of all shapes and sizes.
7. The use of degenerate or trivial or "unartistic" materials.
8. Denial of full conscious control over the artefact.
9. Automatic or aleatory ways of doing things.
10. A taste for the margins of social life.
11. A wish to celebrate the "insignificant" or disreputable in modernity.
12. The rejection or parody of painting's narrative conventions.
13. The false reproduction of painting's established genres.
14. The parodying of previously powerful styles.

One can think of examples of these practices of negation. Clark himself cites Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* as an instance of 1. Cezanne's undifferentiated paint textures when "describing" different objects within his still lives would be covered by 3. Pop Art's quotidian subject matter might easily be placed under 11. Manet's *Olympia* exemplifies the rejection of narrative cited in 12. And the deployment by Jasper Johns, in the 1950s, of paint surfaces indirectly but insistently signifying the angst-soaked pictures of Pollock or de Kooning - these would fall under heading number 14.

Commenting upon this checklist Atkinson writes that it appears to cover "almost every aspect of the modernist agenda". [29] However, it looks to be the case that each of these erstwhile radical points of negation have been assimilated into what is now the acceptable frame of Modernist (and it would seem Postmodernist) practice. Atkinson notes that if this is in fact the case then not only are the artworks generated by these strategies already recuperated but the strategies themselves are assimilated. Following from this, it is arguable that Capitalism itself employs these strategies of negation or disaffirmation to - and this is paradoxical - affirm its own existence and operation. "This is done", Atkinson suggests, "by influencing beforehand what the character of negation will be." [30] A de-traditionalising tendency is thus already at work within Modernism.

If Atkinson is correct in his conclusions about the "fit" of Clark's list as it pertains to contemporary work then the current position of practice is truly intractable. What happens, asks Atkinson, when practice falls off the end of Clark's list? It does indeed sometimes do this. Can one today still put together a genuinely disaffirmative practice? And if so, then what exactly would such a practice look like? How would it operate and how could it continue to operate in the face of a system in which everything critical appears to ultimately become part of the established order?

Writing in "British Political Art at Coventry" Susan and Terry Atkinson put forward the view that the minimum condition required for going on with practice in a meaningful way is the development of "a critique that capitalism is sufficiently strategically unsure of as to make the effort, develop a new strategy, to appropriate the work." [31] Such a constantly shifting order of activity looks to be implicitly involved in a process of de-traditionalisation. Not wishing to affirm the culture that produced Auschwitz and the atomic bomb, a disaffirmative practice is of necessity an attempt to step sideways from that which has solidified into a permanently present, normative form. "There is", observes Edward Shils, an inherently normative element in any tradition of belief which is presented for acceptance; it is presented with the intention of producing affirmation and acceptance." [32] The tradition of Modernist art practice, even if it is, in Harold Rosenberg's phrase, "the tradition of the new" [33], has expanded to the point at which it has apparently become all-encompassing. Chasing the quick thrill of the novel object or style is now part of art's ordered disorder, so much so that practice is in a kind of abyss, a relativist swamp wherein the possibility of acting to challenge affirmative values is already part of the prescribed pattern of response. The parameters of the artworld look vigorously liberal - nothing appears to genuinely disturb them; the edges of avant-garde practice constantly renew themselves. Roland Barthes astutely recognised that "the avant-garde is that restive language which is going to be recuperated." [34] This perception is critical. How can a practice such that which Atkinson
has developed over the last thirty years not be dragged, eventually, into the domain of the "acceptable"? The radical element in Atkinson's work may not be its (as it were necessary) inconsistency, by which I mean its vigilant and cunning changes of position, but rather those points proposed, arguments made, and observations scrupulously acted upon by Atkinson, as outlined in his critical writings and paralleled within the objects he makes.

It is perhaps impossible to outflank a culture industry whose very modus operandi is based on what Benjamin so sharply dubbed "the eternal recurrence of the new". [35] What holds out as potentially radical within Atkinson's practice is his combination of a consistent theoretical position with a pertinently diverse, aesthetically challenging series of visual works. When the tradition is one in which breaking with tradition has become the norm a complex understanding of how the culture industry negotiates constant change is required. The works made by Atkinson operate in knowing dialogue with market-generated styles, indeed they implicitly position themselves in relation to the very concept of style itself. The Grease works, for example, do not function as signifiers of the New but are, together with Atkinson's writings, a commentary on the market's endless generation of the "New". "The New is not a fashion", noted Barthes, it is a value, the basis of all criticism". [36] The work of Atkinson may be regarded as new in this sense, that of advocating values against which other more evidently transient work might be judged.

Atkinson's position, if it is, as I believe, correct, would alter, were it generally understood, the making of art. His practice is a form of metalanguage, which if correctly read realigns the parameters of what art, in the twentieth century, has become. Though employing both conventional and unconventional materials Atkinson's output still holds to the radical position negotiated by certain conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, including Atkinson himself. This position is nothing less than a recognition of the "arbitrary" nature of the institution of art and its place within capitalism in the late twentieth century. [37] Atkinson's attack on the conventions of art and the artist, on "visual language" and upon the thinly postulated proposition of the so-called authentic self give to his practice a genuinely subversive edge.

I want to conclude with a brief account of that phase of Atkinson's work collected together under the rubric Enola Gay. This is a series of paintings and constructions made by Atkinson between about 1989 and 1992, many of which were produced in relation to the genre of the monochrome, a genre, according to Atkinson, "concerned with a kind of pure painting, an emblematic, all-over field of colour...". [38] This work is also intended to raise questions about the relationship between figuration and non-figuration. Atkinson considers the monochrome to be "one of the most simple and draconian figures of non-figuration." [39] By "figures of non-figuration" he is suggesting that non-figurative or "abstract" work is by now so established a way of working as to have become a figurative form.

The Enola Gay paintings/constructions also partially emerged...through a concern to contrive borders over which figuration and non-figuration become hard to distinguish one from the other...(I am presuming that producing non-figurative work is an act of representation). Thus the moves across and into the problematic went something like his. Any object/image with which we become sufficiently familiar we come to remember as a figure - we hold in our memory an image of this image/object. Our memory, it seems, is representational or it is nothing. We necessarily remember figuratively. Thus in respect of the relation figuration/non-figuration we have a figuration of non-figuration." [40]
Another reason for Atkinson's choice of the monochrome as a point of departure for a body of work is that

The monochrome seems decisively linked to geometric figuration. Much art practice which conspicuously uses geometry...sidles up to a process of instrumentalising art...Geometry as a technocratic formalism is always in the vicinity of technocratic authoritarianism. [41]

By which remarks Atkinson means that the use of rigidly geometric elements within art is not the result of disinterested formal concerns but is an approach linked to metaphysical claims, to values believed to be beyond contingent historical circumstance. Atkinson uses the word "authoritarian" because such values assert that a localised, particular aesthetic formulation is true for all times and places.

Another ideological feature of the monochrome is that such work is very often thought to communicate to the viewer emotions not transmittable through linguistic means. Atkinson writes:

A common claim in art is that such and such (say a painting) says what language cannot say. In art practice language is often held out as a kind of boundary over and past which the signs of art "speak"...Language using is a form of life. The public practice of art making is not instead of language using, it is not either an extension of it, but a significant part of that form of life. [42]

In other words, all human activity is language-related, and any claims for art holding transcendental, "timeless" qualities are in fact merely ideological, non-neutral formulations grounded in particular cultural values and locations. This Wittgensteinian recognition of the unavoidable domain of language has informed Atkinson's practice since the early days of Art & Language.

On the surface of each of the Enola Gay works is to be found, sometimes very discreetly placed, the emblematic image of an aircraft, rendered in such a way as to suggest that the craft is moving out from the work's surface, into the space occupied by the viewer. This mark, trace or cipher is intended as a rendition of the B29 bomber responsible, in August 1945, for the destruction of Hiroshima (the pilot named the craft after his mother, "Enola Gay"). This deployment of a spectral representation of death upon the surface of the works serves to propose that even in the most allegedly neutral and transcendent of art forms - the monochrome - the signature of capitalist culture, a culture steeped in moral contradictions, leaves its trace. The culture responsible for the monochrome also produced the mentality and the technology that made possible, and realised the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Thus, once again, Atkinson's practice holds to a carefully considered position of critique. Rather than affirming cultural conventions in his work Atkinson acts to raise a discussion about the culture of Capitalism from, but not only from the material actuality of the pieces he makes. The theoretical armature Atkinson employs opens up a means of fabricating a practice able to meaningfully address the conditions of production and distribution, whilst still allowing its author some kind of critical distance from the ideologies dominating the marketplace.
It is difficult, today, to see where exactly "tradition" stakes its claim. Objects which might once have appeared as antithetical to the prevailing framework of art increasingly find a neat and ready home there. To offer a serious and potentially deep critique of the capitalist institution of art it is necessary to destabilise the predominant conventions of art, both at the level of the individual art object and, equally importantly, as regards the artist him or herself.

A disaffirmative practice must by its very nature act to de-traditionalise the affirmative role art plays within capitalist culture. Tradition has itself become a mire of negations and nifty shifts of position played out in response to earlier moves made within the form of life that art is. Tradition needs to be, not recovered as Fuller and his acolytes would have it, but broken. In Atkinson's perceptive theoretical formulations, together with their intriguing practical accompaniment we have the strongest signs of a most intense and relentless disaffirmation.

Notes


2. Ibid., p. 6.


6. Ibid., p. 8.


8. Ibid., p. 49.

9. Ibid., p. 49.

10. Ibid., p. 61.

11. Ibid., p. 62.

12. See ibid, p. 57.

13. Ibid., p. 54.


15. Ibid., p. 49.

16. For a reproduction of this drawing see Atkinson, *Works...*, p. 18.

17. This was one of numerous remarks noted by Peter Suchin during seminars and lecture presentations, held between 1980 and 1982, at which Atkinson was either a contributor or speaker.

18. See note 17.

19. Atkinson's concern here is in part the commodification of what remains of the concentration camps. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's seminal discussion of art and culture is to be found in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, 1979.
20. "Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Theodor W Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", in Adorno, Prisms, MIT Press, 1982, p. 34.

21. See note 17.

22. For a discussion of realism in relation to the work of Atkinson and of Art & Language see John Roberts, Postmodernism, Politics and Art, Manchester University Press, 1990, particularly the chapters directly concerned with these artists' work. I am not entirely in agreement with Roberts' account. See Peter Suchin, "The Missing Line: Postmodernism, Politics and Art", Variant, No. 8, Autumn 1990.


25. See the lists given under the heading "Grease Pages" in Atkinson's Mute 1, Galleri Prag, Copenhagen, 1988, p. 22.


27. Frascina (Ed.), p. 55.


29. Ibid., p. 9.

30. Ibid., p. 10.

31. "British Political Art at Coventry", Mute 1, p. 18.


36. Ibid., p. 40.


39. Ibid., p. 25.

40. Ibid., p. 24.

41. Ibid., p. 27.

42. Ibid., p. 27. This and the previous extract from Atkinson, together with a version of some of the remarks made in the paragraph here immediately following them, were previously cited in Peter Suchin, "Art and language", Art Monthly, No. 198, July - August 1996, pp. 15 - 16 (letter). For other, related articles and correspondence largely concerning Atkinson see Art Monthly, Numbers 196 (Robert Garnett), 197 (Simon Morley), 199 (John Timberlake), and 201 (Stephen Newton, Peter Suchin), 202 (Stewart Home), May - December 1996. For a review of some of Atkinson's Enola Gay and Grease works see Peter Suchin, Mute 3, Variant, No. 13, Winter/Spring 1993.
In the mid-1970s the composer, musician, record producer, lecturer, theorist of popular culture, video artist and diarist Brian Eno became a pioneer in the field of the small, independent music label, releasing a series of ten long-playing discs under the collective name "Obscure Records". A few years later, in 1978, Eno instigated a second series, with his Music for Airports being the first of a four-record project collectively labelled "Ambient". Both series were packaged in an idiosyncratic, easily recognisable manner, giving to their overall presentation a coherent sense of intention, purpose, and design. With the Obscure works the composer's name had been the most prominent wording on the sleeve, the series name being indicated only on the cover's reverse. With the Ambient works, however, this collective title dominated the textual element of the layout. Each sleeve also displayed what appeared to be an enlarged but unreferenced section of a geological map, a link to a particular but unspecified location. [1]

The music contained within these "Ambient" records formed, together with the general unity of the design, a sort of proposal or argument pertaining to the function of, and possibilities for contemporary music. In the sleeve notes to Music for Airports Eno declared that his intention was "to produce original pieces ostensibly (but not exclusively) for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres." "Ambient Music", he continued, "must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; It must be as ignorable as it is interesting."

The Obscure recordings also carried essays relating to the music contained on the discs. Discreet Music, released by Eno in 1975, included a statement in which he described how, as a collusion of circumstances that included a faulty stereo system and the effects of an accident suffered earlier that year, he inadvertently heard a recording of 18th century harp music in "what was for me a new way of hearing music - as part of the ambience of the environment just as the colour of the lights and the sound of the rain were parts of that environment." Eno went on to propose that Discreet Music be listened to "at comparatively low levels, even to the extent that it frequently falls below the threshold of audibility", and referred to Erik Satie's idea of a music that could mix with the sounds of knives and forks during dinner. The remark from Satie to which Eno alluded is worth quoting at length: "we must bring about", Satie observed, a music which is like furniture - a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks at dinner, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometime fall between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralise the street noises which so indiscreetly enter into the play of conversation. To make such music would be to respond to a need. [2]

Satie is well known today, almost eighty years after his death, for his gentle, "Impressionistic" piano music, but he is at the same time frequently dismissed by the musical
establishment as a mere amateur, with the music itself being considered, in Gavin Bryars' words, "lightweight, humouristic and eccentric". [3] Yet Satie's *Furniture Music*, to which he refers in the passage quoted above, is nothing if not a seminal influence upon what is certainly one of today's most prominent musical forms, "background" or "elevator" music, or in its brand-name version, "Muzak". Satie not only theorised the possibility of a music that would dissolve into the general ambient noises of the environment, but in fact produced several examples of this paradoxical musical form, intended to be perceived as *music* and yet to be ignored. [4]. Today, it is virtually impossible to escape from the constant drone or babble of background music, whether it is rock, pop, jazz or classical works that are used to modify the atmosphere of a place, or those more consciously manufactured background effects such as those supplied by companies such as Muzak Incorporated itself.

Being keen to distinguish his own Ambient work from that of the producers of this manipulative product, Eno succinctly compared the latter with the former:

> The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term Muzak. The connotations that this term carries are those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces - familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music...Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to "brighten" the environment by adding stimulus to it...Ambient Music is intended to produce calm and a space to think. [5.]

The manifesto-like quality of this statement is apparent in the deliberate contrasting of "corporate-produced" background music with the sort of music released on the Ambient label. Its assertive tone implies conflict and critique, the refusal of what has become a somewhat normative, if involuntary, listening experience in western culture. J G Ballard has neatly described the negatively utilitarian status of this inescapable aural accompaniment: "the intentions of background music are openly political," he remarks, "and an example of how political power is constantly shifting from the ballot box into areas where the voter has nowhere to mark his ballot paper. The most important political choices in the future will probably never be consciously exercised." These words are quoted in Joseph Lanza's somewhat ambivalent history of canned sound, *Elevator Music*. [6]

Although Lanza provides much information on and around his subject, the overall impression one has upon reading this work is of an uncritical surrender to what is in fact a sharply marketed, piously domineering aesthetic form. "Elevator music", Lanza writes at the conclusion of his account, is, "besides just being good music":

> essentially a distillation of the happiness that modern technology has promised. A world without elevator music would be much grimmer than its detractors (and those who take it for granted) could ever realize...because most of us, in our hearts, want a
world tailored by Walt Disney's "imagineers", an ergonomical "Main Street U.S.A.,"...where the act of paying admission is tantamount to a screen test - and where the music never stops." [7]

This conservative, celebratory account of background music, packed with what are at best some very dubious assumptions and beliefs, can be contrasted with a number of much more politically astute readings of this (and related) phenomena. Writing in the 1960s, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander argued that:

Under present conditions men are beginning to lose the capacity to discriminate between sound and noise – between the desirable and the irrelevant...The problem of isolating undesirable sounds is technically so hard to solve that acoustics engineers now recommend the simpler expedient of providing artificial background noise in one’s own domain as an acoustic cushion or muffler. Making more noise is the only economical way, apparently, of drowning out unwanted noise and of not being overheard. It seems that the illusion of quiet can only be maintained in noise. [8]

And the French politician and theorist Jacques Attali, in his important book Noise The Political Economy of Music, made the following observation about music:

Ambiguous and fragile, ostensibly secondary and of minor importance, it has invaded our world and daily life. Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security. [9]

Attali's point about music's apparent triviality is important. As he also remarked:

All music, any organization of sounds is...a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms...any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form...noise is inscribed from the start within the panoply of power. [10]

One of the difficulties of even raising for discussion the matter of background music is that the topic does not generally appear to be considered worthy of critical debate, or, if it is, then it is so to only a very limited degree. Even in Lanza's ostensibly discursive account background music is presented as an acceptable, indeed desirable aspect of everyday experience, and not something to take issue with or to regard as supplementary to, or as a surplus of, unmediated noise. This in itself suggests how much of an orthodoxy the acceptance of background music has become. People appear to either acknowledge it as a naturalised part of the space they occupy (including public or semi-public environments where they have no say over its presence), or they resign themselves to the thought that they are unable to escape it. "The monologue of standardized, stereotyped music", Attali noted, "accompanies and hems in a daily life in which in reality no one has the right to speak any more...What is called music today is all too often only a disguise for the monologue of power." [11]
Attali’s book offers many interconnected thoughts relating to noise, music and power, two of which are of particular relevance here. The first of these, already touched on above, is that music, a supposedly pleasurable and emotionally expressive force, is not neutral but is (as with the rest of the products of the entertainment industry) politically aligned. Attali emphasises that music’s “appropriation and control is a reflection of power...it is essentially political.” [12]

This claim is expanded elsewhere in his text:

...music is used and produced...in an attempt to make people forget the general violence...to make people believe in the general harmony of the world, that there is order in exchange and legitimacy in commercial power...and...it serves to silence, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human noises. [13]

and also:

Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power...Music and the musician essentially become either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise. [14]

The second thread of Attali’s analysis I want to briefly give attention to here concerns noise as kind of weapon or antagonistic device, an instigator, also, of illness and displeasure: "noise", he boldly states, "is violence: it disturbs." He continues:

To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder...In its biological reality, noise is a source of pain...Diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension, slowed digestion, neurosis, altered diction: these are the consequences of excessive noise in the environment. [15]

Noise is thus a politically engaged or loaded force, a tool of power whose deployment can have, and frequently does have deleterious effects. This is perhaps more obvious when pop music, as opposed to background music proper, is played at high volume in public spaces, negating the possibility of coherent thought, effectively bullying the involuntary listener into submission. Pop music lacks, as it were by definition, the sort of musical structure that can readily be ignored, talked around or through. If Ambient Music can be described as an attempt to tint or otherwise respectfully modify the environment, pop might be read as swamping the context in which it is played, determining a mood from which it is difficult to escape short of literally vacating the space.

Eno's own recordings for the Ambient series, released some four years apart, exemplify two different approaches to the making of Ambient Music. Music for Airports is superficially close to the open, "cool", clear musical structures of certain compositions by Satie, whilst On Land is an altogether much denser amalgam of electronic and "found" sounds, a collage of compressed and processed elements taken from a plethora of sources and locations. This work is arguably connected, at least in its overall approach, to that emphasis upon listening to the environmental sounds in a musical way so passionately advocated in the 1960s by John Cage, a figure Eno has claimed as an important precursor regarding his own work.
Cage was also partly responsible for bringing into prominent attention Satie's persona, music, and writings, including in his influential book *Silence* (1961) a piece on his music and ideas, and also organising one of the first public performances of the enigmatic *Vexations*, a work written by Satie in the early 1890s. Cage's text quotes extensively from Satie's writings, and includes a remark by him that today appears more than pertinent: "There'll probably be some music, but we'll manage to find a quiet corner where we can talk." [16]

*Music for Airports* was composed both as a response to the question of how one might produce music for a particular kind of modern, public space, an airport, but also as a work capable of being able to withstand exposure to a wide variety of contexts and circumstances. Its four tracks, in part produced by cutting the magnetic tape used in the recording studio to different lengths, thus letting the sounds contained on them run randomly in and out of sync, contain numerous points where the music, or one or other of its components, is absent. Between portions of simple piano, synthesizer or voice, silences appear, implicitly mitigating in defence of an "openness" to musical form. "Ambient Music", as again the sleeve notes indicate, "is intended to induce calm and a space to think."

The issue of writing music "for airports" partly developed out of Eno's inveterate travelling through, and waiting around in them:

> In an airport you have this captive group of people who don't really have options; so you can create a place where you can introduce some sort of meditative calm for a while. I guess I'm looking for some feeling of luscious silence, a feeling of solitariness. [17]

The particularity of such spaces as airports requires a specific type of musical structure. On the one hand, at airports, people are frequently nervous, waiting around, keen to leave but stuck there until they are told they can move; on the other, any form of distraction, musical or otherwise, has to fit into the context and concerns of the space in such a way that it doesn't dominate it, or steal too resolutely the listener's attention, not least because passengers are actively waiting to hear announcements relating to their flights, or receive other information. Eno therefore crafted his record around these and other related factors.

However, with *On Land*, the kind of openness so prominent within *Music for Airports* had been replaced by a compressed weave of sound. Though lacking in "gaps" or clear spaces this work offered a different type of aural experience, an openness of a different kind; not a cluster of alternating sounds and pauses but something that might readily be described as *drift*. "Drifting", commented Roland Barthes, "occurs whenever I do not respect the whole". [18] To drift is to give oneself up to a certain condition of language or behaviour, in which the self is fragmented, open to multiplicity and difference, divorced from the orthodox utilitarian mores of everyday life. *On Land*, its title implying being surrounded, located, placed at the centre of something fluid and detached, operates as a collection of dense but distinct moods or atmospheres which are, nonetheless, relatively unassertive. Sonic elements of an implied but imaginary landscape fade in and out of the sound frame, parts of the record itself appearing to be hovering somewhere between the sound source and the space in which it is being heard. Once again, an idea from Barthes, that which he has called, in an idiosyncratic usage, *Text*, is more than mildly pertinent when considered in relation to this record.
Barthes uses the term "Text" to describe a kind of writerly or artistic practice, the implications of which are at the very least radical when juxtaposed with conventional categories of literature or art. In order to sharpen his definition Barthes contrasts it with the more traditional notion of the "Work", with an emphasis upon Text as a new kind of artistic form in which hitherto clearly defined boundaries and conventions are dissolved. Although he is in the first instance discussing literature Barthes' remarks are, I think, more broadly generalisable. (In literature itself an example of a Work might be a Balzac novel or other piece of writing with a clearly structured narrative, emphatically stated meanings or values, and a strong authorial voice; an example of Text might be, to give only the most obvious instance, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*).

In the essay "From Work to Text" Barthes observed that:

> The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. The plural of the Text depends... on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers (etymologically speaking, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric). The reader of the Text may be compared to someone at a loose end...this passably empty subject strolls...on the side of a valley, an *oued* flowing down below (*oued* is there to bear witness to a certain feeling of unfamiliarity); what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogenous variety of substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children's voices from over on the other side, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away.

All these *incidents* are half-identifiable: they come from codes which are known but their combination is unique... [The Text is] "...woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages... antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony...the citations...are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas. [19]

This passage, particularly the part describing walking along a valley's edge, reads like a potential summary the prevalent "mood" of *On Land*, even as Eno himself discussed the record in the notes accompanying the CD version of the recording (1986). Here Eno refers to listening, during a visit to Ghana, to a landscape of sounds through headphones linked to a stereo microphone, thus framing them as "music", as well as to utilising within *On Land* itself recordings of birds, frogs and insects, and "the complete body of my own earlier work". In the interview with Eno conducted by Richard Grabel in 1982 Eno, talking about this record, observed that "There's a way of making music where you specify exactly what's going to happen, you handcraft everything, so when the record is finished it isn't full of surprises for you anymore. This record was made a different way. It's more like a number of actions carried out near microphones. It's apparently a very bland territory at first, but in the way it yields itself it has considerable depths and slowness." [20] Barthes' point about the Text being woven from innumerable references is recalled when one considers Eno's remark about utilising his own earlier recordings as part of the material used in the making of *On Land*; that Eno's music sometimes appears to be something like a treated recollection or memory of other musical forms - the work of Satie or, on occasion, "Country and Western" or "Soul" - adds to the similarity with Barthes' description of Text as citation.
Music for Airports and On Land are in some senses at opposite ends of the aural spectrum that is Ambient Music. Together they provide, and function as exemplars of a type of listening experience that is politically at odds with conventional background music and its supporters. The affinities with the Barthesian Text imply a radical repositioning of the social role of music within society at the present time.

I have discussed at some length what I consider to be Eno's two key Ambient recordings of the 1970s and 1980s, works carefully presented as part of a group of records collectively intended to provoke serious consideration of environmental music as a viable and important artistic category. In practice, quite a number of Eno's other records may be thought to derive from principles associated with Ambient Music, including Discreet Music from 1975, Apollo (1983), Thursday Afternoon (1985) [21], and The Shutov Assembly (1992). It is not possible in the present essay to develop a more extensive analysis of this "category" of music, though I would like to mention two more (sometimes overlapping) features of this work before moving on to discuss Eno's practice as a visual artist. [22]

The first of these themes is the completely artificial nature of Eno's music as it relates to the representation of landscape and place. By referring here to artifice I am certainly not intending to imply a derogatory reading of the music; rather, the point is that the work is, despite often being in part made with conventional musical instruments, produced in and through the novel artistic medium of the recording studio. As such, it is not, despite Eno's frequent use of terms such as "landscape" and "place" when talking or writing about his music, a case of tracing or otherwise capturing the specific atmosphere of actual geographical locations during the making of his records. [23] It is more appropriate to claim that the technology of sound recording [24] enabled Eno to produce false or imagined aural "landscapes", "sound pictures" (as one might call them) of possible locations. As Eno told Anthony Kermer in 1986:

I was...moving into a kind of landscape sensibility of music, the idea being that one is listening to a body of sound presented as a happening in a particular type of space, a location of some sort. One of the characteristics of recorded music is that the composer is in a position to design not only new instruments but new locations for them. One does this by using reverberation, echo, and other such treatments as a part of the composition and not as a cosmetic." [25]

Indeed, for many years Eno had been advocating that the recording studio should be employed not merely to reproduce music initially generated and performed outside the studio, but as itself a means of actually composing music. In this sense the resulting "landscape" was very much a formal or technical outcome of applying this sensibility or attitude to the technology employed in modern sound recording. Whilst frequently working within and across the fields of "pop" and "serious" music, Eno's formative musical experiences were in large part connected with pop, being a founder member in the early 1970s of the "experimental", but commercially very successful Roxy Music. During an interview on the BBC radio programme Kaleidoscope in November 1990 Eno said:

When I first started recording I didn't have the background of a musician, and in fact it was only because of the recording studio and because of the technology that existed there that I was ever able to become a musician of any kind...the recording studio allows you to become a painter with sound, that's really what you do in a
studio, you make pictures with sound...Making records was quite a different way of composing from the techniques that we'd been used to in the past. This is...different from the old idea of presenting a record of a performance. [26]

Eno has also pointed out that:

The recording studio has been responsible for a quiet revolution in music...A completely new form has developed, which people still regard as music because it comes out on record, but which is produced, executed and intended to be listened to in a different way from before. [27]

The second feature to be noted is that the recording studio has also enabled and encouraged is a new emphasis in music making, that of texture and specificity of sound:

The interest today isn't in developing serial music or polyphony or anything like that. It is in constantly dealing with new textures. One of the interesting things about pop music is that you can quite often identify a record from a fifth of a second of it. You hear the briefest snatch of sound and know, "Oh, that's "Good Vibrations," "or whatever...The sound is the thing that you recognise." [28]

Such an emphasis upon texture is clearly evident in Ambient Music; it is one reason why Eno can describe his work as "holographic". [29] With a hologram, any given fragment of the whole image contains, in miniature, the complete picture. Ambient Music is high in textural "content" and low on narrative or chronological development. This kind of composition and structure, like Barthes' Text, foregrounds, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, "the soft drift of the text". [30] The music never changes much, but it never stops changing, a condition compared by Eno to the actions of clouds or a river. [31] The context in which the music exists is tinted by it but the listening subject is not caught up in, not forced to subsume his activities to a predetermined narrative or "assertive" artistic vision, but can instead get on with other things, treating the music as but one of several components of the broader environmental framework of the place thus acoustically "framed".

"Video Paintings" and "Quiet Clubs"

This focus upon slowness, texture, drift and authorial restraint [32] can also be found in Eno's video works, installations, and so-called "Quiet Clubs", the latter being proposals, albeit in part practically realised, for a new kind of public space. In a talk given by Eno following the opening of one of his video installations in Copenhagen in 1986, he remarked:

Music for Airports...was intended as a proposal to take seriously the task of composing music for large public spaces. I hope the present exhibition suggests a type of ambience that might be produced in a more particular social space - perhaps a place poised between a club, a gallery, a church, a square and a park and sharing aspects of all of these. [33]

Eno has, then, in so many words marked out his intention to construct a new kind of social context in which, through a juxtaposition of features in part borrowed from already-extant spaces, new public spaces may be developed. This interest in constructing new social spaces appears to have in part come out of Eno's work as a video artist. In the 1980s, whilst
living in New York, Eno made a number of video works using a conventional camera and recorder. The static camera, turned on its side, and with the colour controls fixed at unconventional settings, recorded the skyline of New York, the towers and other buildings set in sharp contrast at the "bottom" of the image, with, in some cases, the picture mostly framing the sky above the buildings rather than the city structures themselves. As with his Ambient Music (which provided the soundtrack to the video pieces), Eno's video work foregrounded drift and gradual change over action and multiple fast editing (the normal televisual experience). Eno described these works as "video paintings", intending them to be looked at with the aesthetics of painting rather than TV or film:

I see TV as a picture medium rather than a narrative medium. Video for me is a way of configuring light, just as painting is a way of configuring paint. What you see is simply light patterned in various ways. For an artist, video is the best light organ that anyone has ever invented. [34]

The extremely beautiful colour contrasts in Eno's Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan (1980-81/1987) to some extent destroy or distract one from the figurative image on the screen: one focuses instead on the slowly changing colours of the Manhattan skyline as huge clouds float into the rectangle of the screen. Some of these video paintings were shown at airports in the USA and Europe. With respect to these displays Eno observed that:

Soon after the monitors go on, you realise that nothing's going to happen. It lets you off the hook in a way. You know you can sit there and look around and drift back to it whenever you want. So your approach to it is quite different from reading a magazine, where you're put in the position of having to search and concentrate all the time. [35]

The next development in Eno's video work comprised exhibitions of "video sculptures", which led directly to the "Quiet Club" installations. The video sculptures were essentially simply made cardboard or plastic boxes cut into a variety of basic geometrical shapes, and were either mounted on the wall or placed on the floor. Inside each "sculpture" was a video monitor on which images from specially prepared tapes were displayed. Consisting primarily of a sequence of pure colours, the light from these monitors could be seen through, and was modified by, the cardboard or plastic filters out of which the structure was constructed. The effect was one of a constantly shifting range of colours and shapes. Shown usually in large darkened rooms, the effect was - is - quietly but seductively engaging. Kevin Eden summarises the resulting effects:

In these beautiful installations the setting is active, not passive. The environment is more than the sum of its parts; it is the experience. These environments have to be given time. The effects are physical and cumulative. Once the visitor has adjusted to both the low light levels and the slow-moving rhythms, it is not uncommon to stay for several hours, moving contemplatively from zone to zone. The installations are tranquil - they reduce stress and offer a kind of secular solace. [36]

Eno's sound and video installations have been held internationally as exhibitions in art galleries, either as solo shows or as part of broader group exhibitions. The most recent UK showing - there have not been many - was as part of the Hayward Gallery's Sonic Boom in 2000. Within the display, Eno's section was labelled as a proposal for a Quiet Club. A CD of
the music extracted from that used for this particular "Club" was available in the gallery shop. Entitled *Music for Civic Recovery Centre* [37], the title itself gives one more angle or aspect to the notion of the Quiet Club as a critically-functioning public space. A dozen years before the Hayward installation and CD Eno was talking about the Quiet Clubs in the following way:

So many people have said to be that they wish cities always had a permanent location like these exhibitions. It would replace so many aspects of the city that you don’t find any more - like quiet parks, gentlemen’s clubs, even quiet libraries. I want something a little more than a cafe/art gallery that will wrap up all these elements under one roof. [38]

The Quiet Clubs, as such, have not materialised as permanent places, for reasons which I have been unable to ascertain. [39] As a proposition for a new kind of public context they have fairly important implications. If one accepts Jacques Attali’s arguments about the current, all-pervasive state of noise and music, together with his view that the deployment of controlled sound is a means of social manipulation, then the attempt to construct quiet, calming but not bland social spaces is not a trivial or merely decorative concern. Richard Sennett has pointed out, both in his celebrated book *The Fall of Public Man* and elsewhere, [40] that public space as it existed even up until quite recently, has been, and continues to be rapidly eroded. Private capital, and private ownership of what were once public venues continues to increase, and with this will no doubt come more advertising, noise, and promotional material, burying whatever near-neutrality such spaces once had, replacing this with a more than biased manifestation for which the status of a "public service" will be claimed. Just as Ambient Music was a refusal of the dominance of Muzak and imposed noise, the Quiet Club, if it can be made to exist in a more permanent form, might just act as a marker for the return to prominence of a genuinely viable, genuinely public forum, and this even if its origin is or was the art gallery or museum.

This is, finally, to imply that the Utopian intentions attributed to artists at the beginning of the twentieth century may not be entirely a forgotten possibility, nor the deliberate taking up of what may be termed an "avant garde" stance - that of the artist as instigator of broad cultural change - an entirely broken thread. For at the present time, as the public sphere rapidly contracts, it may be left to artists with access to influential positions within culture to propose and pursue new models of social circumstance and exchange. The disarmingly beautiful, yet unassertive space of the Quiet Club is one means through which the widespread privatisation of public space, and public culture, might be seriously, if discreetly, criticised and refused.

**Notes**

1. The other works in the series were: Harold Budd/Brian Eno, *The Plateaux of Mirror* (1980), Laraaji, *Day of Radiance* (1980); Brian Eno, *On Land* (1982). All four recordings are currently available on compact disc.


3. Gavin Bryars, “Berners, Rousseau, Satie”, *Studio International*, Vol. 192, No. 984, November/December 1976, p. 308. It should be pointed out that Bryars is one of Satie’s most ardent supporters and is not party to the derogatory attitude he describes.


7. Lanza, ibid., p. 233.


10. Ibid., p. 6.

11. Ibid., pp. 8 - 9.

12. Ibid., p. 6.

13. Ibid., p. 19.


15. Ibid., pp. 26 - 27.

16. Cage, op. cit., p. 76.


21. Commissioned by the Sony corporation to test the then novel technology of the compact disc, *Thursday Afternoon* was the first recording specifically made with release in this medium in mind. This point is made in Ziyad Georgis/Brian Eno, "East of the Testcard", *Melody Maker*, 23 November 1985 (by ZG). This interview also contains Eno's claim that his video work is the most abstract thing to be seen on a television screen.

22. There is not space in the present account to deal with Eno's more recent "Generative Music", a form of Ambient Music in which various systems are used to produce music which is ever-changing within certain specified parameters, as set up on a computer or other means of storing potential combinations of sounds. See on this pp. 330 - 332 of Eno's *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, Faber, 1996, which also contains sections on Ambient Music and related material.

23. *On Land* does, however, relate to actual places Eno visited during his childhood in East Anglia.


27. Eno, "On record", p. 94.

28. Eno, *"Aurora Musicalis", pp. 76 - 77*; and NB the following quotation from Eno: "I believe we are moving towards a position of using music and recorded sound with the variety of options that we presently use with colour - we might simply use it to "tint" the environment, we might use it "diagrammatically", we might use it to modify our moods in almost subliminal ways. I predict that the concept of "muzak", once it has shed its connotations of aural garbage, might enjoy a new and very fruitful lease of life. Muzak, you see, has one great asset: you don't have to pay attention to it. This strikes me as a generous humility with which to imbue a piece of music, though it is also nice to ensure that the music can offer rewards to those who do give it their attention."

(Quoted in Kevin Eden, "Ambient Lightworks", p. 33).
29. Ibid., p. 77.

30. Walter Benjamin, One-Way Street and Other Writings, NLB, 1979, p. 71.

31. This comparison with natural processes was made by Eno in a talk given in Copenhagen in January 1986, reproduced in Eno, "Works Constructed with Sound and Light", a brochure accompanying his 1986 exhibition at Riverside Studios, London.

32. Eno's Discreet Music essay opens with the sentence: "Since I have always preferred making plans to executing them, I have gravitated towards situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part." This appears to parallel, perhaps inadvertently, Raymond Roussel's remark to Leiris to the effect that he (Roussel) preferred the "domain of Conception to that of reality". See Michel Leiris, "Conception and Reality in the Work of Raymond Roussel", in Raymond Roussel: Life, Death & Works, Alastair Brotchie et al (Eds.), Atlas, 1987, p. 73.

33. Eno, "Works Constructed with Sound and Light".

34. Eno, in Peter Nasmyth/Brian Eno, "New Life of Brian", The Observer Magazine, 17 January 1988, p. 42. Monet's vast canvases of waterlilies might be viewed as a precedent for Eno's video work, focusing as they do on patches of intense light and colour within an otherwise very open compositional field. Other influences or precedents, though I have yet to find them cited elsewhere, might include the television and video works of Nam June Paik (turning the TV on its side, the use of "abstract" images, etc); Wolf Vostell's "TV De-Collage No. 1" of 1958 (a blank canvas behind which are placed several TV monitors, parts of which are visible through holes cut into the canvas); the multiscreen vignettes of Joan Jonas (for example, "Volcano Saga" of 1987); Kurt Schwitters' various Merzbau may have been yet another point of reference for Eno, particularly with respect to the Quiet Clubs.

35. Eno, quoted in Kevin Eden, "Ambient Lightworks", p. 35.


38. Eno, "New Life of Brian", p. 42. Eno himself writes that his video works were in part produced "from a mixture of nostalgia and hope, and from the desire to make a quiet place for myself." (From the liner notes to Eno's video painting Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan, Opal/Hendring, 1987).

39. Eno himself told me, though without conveying further details, that he was unable to realise the project of opening the Clubs. Private conversation, London, Sunday, 25 June, 2000.

40. Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, Faber, 1986. Sennett also made remarks about the decline of public space pertinent to the present essay at a talk given at the Serpentine Gallery, London, on 30 July, 2001. NB the remark from Eno, quoted in Kevin Eden, "Ambient Lightworks", p. 39: "I've thought a lot about public spaces...and how they aren't used very well. They're kind of ignored spaces, nobody thinks they're wonderful to put their work into...".

Note: This essay employs and adapts material from three unpublished texts by Peter Suchin: "The Art of Brian Eno" (1978), "Notes on Noise" (1998), and a letter to Eno, dated 7 April, 2001.

This Year's Module: Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson, The New Idea of the University, Haven Books, 2001


"Education is an important key...but the good life's never won by degrees..." - so sang Bryan Ferry in 1973, himself the holder of a Fine Art degree from the University of Newcastle. This provocative theme of what may or may not be achieved by university graduates is one of the issues taken up in Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson's The New Idea of a University, a timely critique of the Labour Party's reinscription of the role, meaning and ideological framework of the British university. In chapters focusing upon "The Economic Case for Higher Education", "The Old Idea of the University", "The New University for Life", and "Levering Up Standards or Top-Down Drivel", Maskell and Robinson systematically consider recent changes within
higher education, providing what is clearly a polemic against what they see as the government's out and out attack on the universities and their long-held moral and intellectual place within British culture.

"The word "university"", write Maskell and Robinson, "has a history which makes some things almost impossible to say, for example that the university should be for all, or for job-training, or to make us rich." (P. 65). Later in their book they observe:

Scholars are traditionally poor; which is not ideal, but it is positively a bad thing for them to become fat cats, or to expect to be courted by company boards looking for rising entrepreneurs. The educated ought to have a reasonable chance of a comfortable life in the clerisy, but not to expect a direct link between a degree and the creation of wealth." (P. 183)

But that which it is "almost impossible to say" about the university has today become not merely "possible" but a new orthodoxy, one spouted at every turn, both by apologists for the transformation of the universities into profit-driven businesses, and for those who demand an allegedly democratic increase in student numbers, a matter linked to the widening of university access to those who have been excluded in the past. The university's substantial history as a place in which critical and individual thought has been encouraged and protected from the whims of the marketplace has been, as the authors of this book make clear, pulverised into invisibility, obscured by the smokescreens of profit and mock democratic access for all. In the "New University" emphasis is placed for the most part upon the supposedly profitable, utilitarian features of taking up a degree course place. For the Labour Party and its supporters, suggest Maskell and Robinson, "...education is an investment. Education is the same as training; education is useful; education will make us rich." (P. 4).

Quite aside from their abhorrence at the way university managers and "the modern career academic" (p. 41) have taken to this new model of what it is that universities should be about, the authors of this book rightly attend to the absurdity of such claims, mapping out in their opening chapter just how pathetically untrue, and indeed just how scientifically unsound is the argument, proposed by government-sponsored economists, that "profitability" and a university education automatically correspond. "How can we know", they ask, "whether education makes people more productive or not? We can't. We just don't know in any such way as economists understand knowledge. But we invest billions every year on the assumption that we can and do know, all the same." (P. 16).

Maskell and Robinson take issue with the very notion that the universities need to be expanded at all, irrespective of any arguments revolving around ideas of access for those who have been hitherto excluded:

The entire state-subsidized expansion of higher education, maintained by so many governments over so many years, with no semblance of justification offered for it that isn't economic, has been, it seems, a tremendous error, economically. And if the subsidies were withdrawn, the grotesquely bloated system they have created would shrink back to something that made economic (and educational) sense. The so-called customers would be found simply not to exist and the so-called need for this
so-called education would vanish with them. In its present shape and size the whole thing is simply a creation of wastefulness. (P. 13)

In the closing pages of the book it is suggested that what should in part replace university expansion is a return to some form of technical training, a reinstating of the polytechnics, funded in large measure by those businesses who would wish their future employees be "trained" - which is not to be confused with "educated" - in specific job-related skills and abilities. This distinction between education and training is markedly present throughout the volume. Maskell and Robinson do not sneer at the notion of employment-related training, rather they emphasise that education is a very different thing to the learning of skills necessary to the carrying out of specific technical tasks.

The question of the relationship between the university and truth surfaces at several points. Presenting the university as a place in which critical thought is to be assiduously encouraged, Maskell and Robinson emphasise that education should connect with life in general rather than just to one's career, and teaching should take place in a way that extends discussion well beyond the narrow confines of a given academic subject. They go so far as to state that "teaching" is in fact too problematic a term for this exchange, linking this word to the new situation in which students are expected to regurgitate, in exams or essays, particular facts transmitted in "courses" or "modules", a means of information transmission that can be easily policed by government examining boards. Citing at length the works of J H Newman and of Jane Austen, Maskell and Robinson propose that these writers' ideas on education offer an important, desirable model of how education should take place and of what it means to be educated, as opposed to merely trained. "Jane Austen", they point out, "consistently, systematically, presents the instructed mentality as the opposite of the educated, and the reception of instruction as one way of not being educated at all." (P. 39). Whilst citing such figures fits perfectly well with the general critical thrust of The New Idea of the University Maskell and Robinson's respect for "English Literature" is sometimes a little too intense, as though close attention to this subject were the sole mean of saving the university from itself. The expression "common sense" is also used throughout the book as though it were an unloaded term, though it might easily be used by government ministers to defend their radical restructuring of higher education. After all, in our increasingly commodified culture it can too easily appear "right and proper" that one should pay for one's education.

This idea is, however, another government-speak cliche that is held up to scrutiny by Maskell and Robinson, as is the whole apparatus of the New University: the extracting of huge fees from students and their parents, the interminable quality inspections, the churning out of more and more pieces of so-called "research" designed solely with money-generation in mind, the proliferation of managers with their ugly, insensitive, self-serving ideas about turning universities into profitable business ventures. These and other pernicious features of the university as it presently stands or is trying to become are all spelt out in The New Idea of the University and taken, with much pertinent and constructive argument, to task.

This book should be taken seriously by those who determine the fate of the university, including staff, students and potential students, as well as those ministers and administrators who have been influential in carrying out the immense restructuring of recent years. To reverse the process that has ruined what were once, whatever their problems and contradictions, important centres of intellect and invention will not be easy. As Maskell and
Robinson all too convincingly indicate, "The real crisis in British education is not at the bottom, amongst an underclass, but at the top, amongst those in charge." (P.144)


The Critic Never Sleeps

Art Monthly, No. 266, May 2003

If Matthew Arnatt (Art Monthly No. 265) is going to theorise in public about what art criticism should or shouldn't be or do, it would help if he put his thoughts into something approaching a coherent form. Arnatt may believe that there is no crisis in contemporary art or criticism but the very constitution of his prose - muddled, pompously but unnecessarily "wordy", unconvincingly assertive - exemplifies the very problem he denies. One indication of a "crisis" in art writing might well be that many people who purport to be "critics" - at least Arnatt doesn't use that word about himself - have a lot of trouble expressing themselves clearly. A second indication is that many critics no longer appear in any serious sense critical of anything at all. Rasheed Araeen was right to refer, also in AM 265, to Michael Archer as "an unashamed apologist for the system", since Archer's piece in the previous issue was so vigorously committed to the view that "what is there is what needs to be looked at." (Archer) Whilst this is of course, at some bluntly tautological level, true, it is not the whole picture, and implies a model of criticism that is passive and lazy, proposing nothing that might be termed a corrective or an alternative account. One wonders why it took Archer four pages of the magazine to get to the claim that "Art writing is not worth much. It's over and gone as soon as it is finished." This, like Arnatt's anti-critic stance, is a kind of perversity, writing at length about how art writing is pointless and ineffectual. But clearly the discourses of criticism are not so easily disposable or their persistence and effect void of cumulative repercussions. Arnatt, in particular, appears to want a common sense criticism that is akin to chatting with your mates down the pub - he dislikes criticism as personal opinion on the one hand, but layered, recursive, complicated criticism is not his cup of tea either. It all sounds dangerously close to that old cliche that art shouldn't require any additional commentary because good or authentic art simply and squarely "speaks for itself".

Opening with remarks about how the "huge amount of thoughtfulness bubbling away in the background in discussions of criticism...needs cutting short", Arnatt goes on to conclude that criticism should be "maturely conscious of failings". The latter observation does not, however, follow from the first. The "maturity" Arnatt asks for is inseparable from the "thoughtfulness" he so clearly despises. The idea of self-reflexive criticism is anathema to Arnatt, who naively reads complicated accounts of artworks as mere summaries of opinion, as though nothing could be demonstrated by comparison, be argued for or rigorously explained in a way that added up to more than a subjective interest or personal point of view. This act of dismissing something as "just opinion" is a problem within art teaching, too, which bears, incidentally, a considerable family resemblance to the criticism of fine art. Art students occasionally tell their tutors "that's only your opinion" when the inadequacy of a particular way of attempting to realise something in their work is pointed out to them. If one accepts that criticism might be in some ways akin to teaching then it is perhaps easier to imagine that it could, as part of its day to day procedures, concern itself with comparison, evaluation and
analysis as well as description or reportage. Description might be a necessary condition of criticism but it is not a sufficient one.

In his *Image-Music-Text* (1977) Roland Barthes suggested that to criticise "is to put into crisis". It is hard to see how positions such as those occupied by either Archer or Arnatt put anything into crisis, or, in the latter's case, do anything at all other than report upon a work for those readers who are, in Arnatt's words, "looking fairly innocently for information on existing art." Arnatt writes as though in defence of these "innocent" readers but it is patronising to assume that readers' aspirations stay within the very low level of engagement he champions. It is arguable that the critic should provide the reader with an informed discourse, not a merely descriptive account - not that a purely descriptive (i.e. value-free) representation is in any case possible.

Although Arnatt's writing style leaves it unclear as to whether he is an aficionado of Tom Morton's writing or not, Morton's piece in the March 2003 issue of *Frieze* on Sir John Soane, quoted by Arnatt, is typical of what is wrong with much so-called criticism today. Morton gushes on about Soane's museum as though it were a trendy wine bar: "Kurt Schwitters would have liked it, and so would Jorge Luis Borges. It's a good place for second dates" - how could Morton know what Schwitters or anyone else would think about the place? He turns it into something trite, worth visiting only because it is "a secret everyone seems to know about", a remark designed to flatter those who do "know" and mock those who do not. Ostensibly a comment upon the museum, these words are little more than an oxymoronic attempt to come over as clever and cool. I prefer the suggestion of another *Frieze* contributor, Jan Verwoert, who notes in the April edition that "it might be about time to get the aggressive edge back into criticism." Vincent Pecoil and Alison Green, writing in *AM* 265, raise a lot of questions about the relations between Modernism, Postmodernism and the loss of art's utopian function through its increasing commodification. Though these writers are not "aggressive" as such they are certainly not afraid to directly address the contradictions - but also the possibilities within - recent art and criticism. One may not accept every point they make – "visual language" is another dull ghost from the past – but their texts are clear and coherent, informative and engaged, a far cry from Matthew Arnatt's surly and ultimately unproductive attack on the necessary complexities of art criticism today.

Notes on Noise
Noisegate, No. 10, 2003

“There'll probably be some music, but we'll manage to find a quiet corner where we can talk.” – Erik Satie [1]

When the composer John Cage declared that there was no such thing as silence, he wasn't joking. [2] It's true – unless you are wealthy or just plain lucky you can't – you just can't get away from noise. The idea of quietness as a normal or at least preferable condition of life has vanished, to be replaced by the now all-too-naturalised landscape of noise. There is, today, a pornography of noise. Certain relatively unobtrusive environmental sounds – birdsong, wind, rain, flowing water, speech are in large part obliterated, buried beneath, or
intermingled with what might be described as a relentless, and certainly not ecstatic, scatology of sound.

It would be possible to document the diversity of sounds in the environment, supply long lists of discrete noise-producing technologies and contexts. This is not my intention here. There can never have been a time in history without noise, and one could trace, though it would be a vast and demanding task, a history of noises in culture. The pattern and presence of artificial sounds must have taken on throughout the centuries many different formations, and such sonic agglomerations continue, no doubt, to emerge and disappear today. The issue is not so much one of natural sounds versus unnatural ones, rather that the noises forming today's aural "landscape" exist at a new and insidious order of intensity and penetration. Some aspects of this condition are summarised in a few sentences by Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander:

> Under present conditions men are beginning to lose the capacity to discriminate between sound and noise – between the desirable and the irrelevant...The problem of isolating undesirable sounds is technically so hard to solve that acoustics engineers now recommend the simpler expedient of providing artificial background noise in one's own domain as an acoustic cushion or muffler. Making more noise is the only economical way, apparently, of drowning out unwanted noise and of not being overheard. It seems that the illusion of quiet can only be maintained in noise. [3]

There are two extremely insistent offenders, both of which would appear to be virtually inescapable. These are the phenomenon of background music, and, secondly, such music's ostensibly private relation, the personal stereo. These notes focus, for the most part, upon the former.

2

Jacques Attali makes the following observation about music:

> Ambiguous and fragile, ostensibly secondary and of minor importance, it has invaded our world and daily life. Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security. [4]

Attali's point about music's apparent triviality is important. As he also remarks:

> All music, any organization of sounds is...a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms...any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form...noise is inscribed from the start within the panoply of power. [5]

One of the difficulties of raising for discussion the matter of background music is that the subject does not generally appear to be considered worthy of debate. This in itself suggests how much of an orthodoxy the acceptance of background music has become. Either people take it as a naturalised part of the space they occupy
(including public or semi-public environments where they have no say over its presence), or they resign themselves to the thought that they are unable to escape it. “The monologue of standardized, stereotyped music”, Attali writes, “accompanies and hems in a daily life in which in reality no one has the right to speak any more...What is called music today is all too often only a disguise for the monologue of power.” [6]

Attali’s book offers many interconnected thoughts relating to noise, music and power, two of which are of particular relevance here. The first of these, touched on above, is that music, a supposedly pleasurable and emotionally expressive entity, is not neutral but is (as with the rest of the entertainment industry) politically aligned. Attali emphasises that music’s “appropriation and control is a reflection of power...it is essentially political.” [7]

This claim is expanded elsewhere in his text:

...music is used and produced...in an attempt to make people forget the general violence...to make people believe in the general harmony of the world, that there is order in exchange and legitimacy in commercial power...and...it serves to silence, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human noises. [8]

and also:

Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power...Music and the musician essentially become either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise. [9]

The second thread of Attali’s analysis I want to foreground concerns noise as antagonistic strategy and instigator of illness:

...noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder...In its biological reality, noise is a source of pain...Diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension, slowed digestion, neurosis, altered diction: these are the consequences of excessive noise in the environment. [10]

Noise, is thus a politically engaged or loaded force, a tool of power whose deployment can have, and frequently does have deleterious effects.

3

Some people appear to be unable to cope with silence. When people defend what they take to be their right to have music playing loudly where other people are also present, the one “right” they never mention is that of the others’ right to silence.

4

The concept of music specifically designed as a background against which one’s day to day activities are to take place appears to derive in large part from the works and ideas of Erik Satie. One of the most interesting and unorthodox figures in recent musical history, Satie
held carefully considered views on music and its possible functions. In 1920 he put into practice for the first time his ideas on what he termed "musique d'ameublement" or "furniture music", which he described in the following words:

Nevertheless, we must bring about a music which is like furniture – a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometimes fall between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralise the street noises which so indiscretely enter into the play of conversation. To make such music would be to respond to a need. [11]

This use of music – "softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself", is very different to the deployment of background music in virtually all public places today. One encounters such music in pubs, cafes, restaurants and shops of all types, shopping centre thoroughfares, motorway service stations, airports, social security offices, and in aircraft, boats, trains and taxis. A version of it even turns up at the end of the telephone.

A key difference between the kind of musical backdrop suggested by Satie and that of companies like Muzak Inc., the most well-known producer of "canned" music, is that the work of the former recognises a function for music that isn't indexed to a notion of overt social control. Implicit within the bastardisation of well-known tunes carried out by the Muzak company in an attempt to get people to be more productive at work, or to become more dedicated shoppers, is an idea, too, of "regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies." [12] Brian Eno, from whose sleeve notes to his "Ambient" record Music for Airports (1978) these words are taken, describes an ambience as "an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint." (13) Being understandably keen to distinguish his own experiments in the field of background music from Muzak and related products, Eno makes clear that "Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting." [14] Such music is, furthermore, "intended to induce calm and a space to think." [15] These honourable musical intentions or tasks are in extreme contrast to the results conventional background music is designed to achieve. As it becomes more and more difficult to find public places free of loud music the kind of low-key aural framework proposed by Satie and Eno increases in attraction, and almost begins to take on a politically radical edge. Eno’s 1975 recording Discreet Music is accompanied by a short essay in which Eno acknowledges the influence of Satie upon his own work, proposing that Discreet Music be listened to "at comparatively low levels, even to the extent that it frequently falls below the threshold of audibility." [16] Background music of the usual variety negates the possibility of coherent thought, bullying the listener into submission. Often nothing other than pop music played in a public space, it lacks the sort of musical structure that can readily be ignored. With pop, the context isn’t merely "tinted" by the music: it’s positively swamped.

The presence of music in the workplace, an environment in which the worker has, by definition, to spend a large part of his or her time, is a peculiarly disturbing example of the
imposition of music, which of course is also heard by the shop’s customers. Certain chain stores such as Asda and Waterstone’s – and there are many others – utilise background music to “flavour” the mood of their shops. Asda has its own radio station, a twenty-four hour a day affair in which the shop’s propaganda is pumped out to staff and customers alike. At night, the shelf-stackers listen to it, whilst during opening hours customers are acoustically prodded into a state of mind more commonly associated with TV game shows. [17]

The background music in bookshops such as Waterstone’s is presumably supposed to connote intellectual sophistication, conferring upon the customer the status of cultured consumer. Classical, jazz and “art” music casts a more “serious” shadow than that played in other shops, where pop is more often the norm. The idea that any serious reader would want to be blasted with the misrepresentative fragments of an erstwhile unified musical score whilst trying to choose a book is not a little strange. It is patronising too, suggesting that the company’s directors consider their customers incapable of being left to their own (uncluttered) devices.

A frequent claim made in defence of background music is that music provides “atmosphere”. Implicit in this suggestion is a notion of neutral or zero atmosphere, as though without music in the room there’d be a blank space or void. That any space must have, as it were by definition, a particularity of mood, is not recognised. The next step in this comical logic is to pour into the room, through the use of music not at all designed to be talked over, an “atmosphere”. How blindly dogmatic this approach turns out to be can be observed wherever people are desperately trying to talk around or through the music, giving it as little attention as possible in their attempt to converse with the person they’re with.

6

A frequent claim made in defence of background music is that music provides “atmosphere”. Implicit in this suggestion is a notion of neutral or zero atmosphere, as though without music in the room there’d be a blank space or void. That any space must have, as it were by definition, a particularity of mood, is not recognised. The next step in this comical logic is to pour into the room, through the use of music not at all designed to be talked over, an “atmosphere”. How blindly dogmatic this approach turns out to be can be observed wherever people are desperately trying to talk around or through the music, giving it as little attention as possible in their attempt to converse with the person they’re with.

7

And the radio is in the hands of such a lot of fools trying to anaesthetise the way that you feel...They say you better listen to the voice of reason/But they don’t give you any choice ’cos they think that it’s treason/So you had better do as you are told, you better listen to the radio. (Elvis Costello) [18]

8

Even within academic institutions, in which the diffusion of background music would once have been unthinkable, one is unable to escape from an imposed order of noise. I know of one art school in which there is now literally nowhere one can go which is free of noise. Usually it is Radio 1 playing at a high volume, but if one enters the secretaries’ office it’s a station purporting to offer the “classics”. In other rooms, where students work at desks or easels, it is exactly the same. When variety does arrive it is in the form of a different pop radio station or tape, but never any of the other, multiple, available musical forms. An unwavering din permeates the walls of “private” rooms, infiltrates seminars and tutorials, creeps up on you unannounced just when you thought you had escaped its wretched presence. A visit to the canteen feeds you with more scrappy pop records played over the building’s PA system. Perhaps they’ll have it in the library next, which would only be the logical extension of a trend already well advanced.
George Steiner:

This is being written in a study in a college of one of the great American universities. The walls are throbbing gently to the beat of music coming from one near and several more distant amplifiers. The walls quiver to the ear or to the touch roughly eighteen hours per day, sometimes twenty-four. The beat is literally unending. [19]

Recent changes in the British education system, resulting in competition between universities for potential students, has put the emphasis more and more upon “what the customer wants”, and less and less upon the transformation of the person being educated. The student is now a customer or client, and as such expects to be given, in return for payment of their fees, whatever environment he or she wishes to have. If this requirement is constant pop music in the studio, then that’s what they are going to get, as opposed to someone proposing that this is not an appropriate educational ambience and is in fact one which actually militates against serious study.

This, anyway, is the tendency within, if not yet the actual condition of universities and art schools. With the British art world so closely connected with the pop industry it is hardly surprising that art students – some of them – feel they have to have pop music in the background at all times, and that many tutors see no problem with this. Linked as it is to a belief in the sovereign right of the individual to release upon others his innermost feelings, this ideology of unrestrained expression is supported by the kind of drivel related by radio DJs and the popular performers whose records they play. The idea that the making of art might involve thoughtful consideration and some kind of distance from capitalism’s most reductive, stereotypical representations is never raised; neither is the point that not everyone present might want to listen to the rubbish selected by the few insistently selfish “specialists” in noise.

Furthermore, if such music is thought to be worth listening to, why is it treated merely as background? Visual artists and art students expect their own work to be given attention and respect, yet this is precisely the opposite way to how they treat the music they consume. I am not suggesting that a background of classical music might be better than or preferable to one of pop: there are all kinds of ideological problems attached to “classical music”. But it is pop music that is most often present as background, its ubiquity looking more and more like one of its characteristic features as a form.

In any new theory of noise, the concept of passive listening would need to be elaborated. The expression might be used to describe the “inhalation” of unwanted noise, and also the uncritical (but willing) consumption of background music. Psychoanalysis has indicated that individuals are unconsciously affected by their environment. It follows that the widespread presence of pop and other music, part of the “harmless fun” of our times, must carry an influencing edge. Pop music, so replete with songs celebrating freedom, is, with few exceptions, a patchwork of received ideas masquerading as authentic novelty.

We require the development of a critical listening.

Why is music as a constant background “acceptable”, and why are people unable to get through the day without a constant curtain of noise against which everything they do takes place?
There is obviously the issue of pleasure. But one person’s pleasure takes on a different form when it invades, uninvited, another person’s space.

A story by Heinrich Boll, “Murke’s Collected Silences”, describes the activities of a man who, working in a radio station, has access to the interviews recorded and stored for transmission at a later date. Murke edits out the pauses and quiet moments occurring during the recordings, takes home the sections of tape, and listens to the accumulated silences. [2]

Notes
1. Quoted in John Cage, Silence, MIT, 1969, p. 76.
2. Ibid., p. 8. Cage’s observation, intended, I think, to be taken literally and without irony, nonetheless foregrounds “silence” as a kind of framing device in which potentially interesting, if sometimes hardly noticeable sounds are brought to conscious audibility.
5. Ibid., p. 6.
6. Ibid., pp. 8 – 9.
7. Ibid., p. 6.
8. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., pp. 26 – 27.
11. Quoted in Cage, op. cit., p. 76. At an event at the Barbazange Gallery in Paris in March 1920 Satie is reported to have insisted that the audience, who were sitting down to listen to the small group of musicians who had begun playing, continue talking and walking about without giving their attention to the music. See Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, Faber, 1959, pp. 132 – 133.
12. Brian Eno, Music for Airports, Polydor/EG, 1978. The notes, printed on the inner sleeve of the original release, are not included with the CD version of the recording. For an account of the history of Muzak Inc. and of background music in general, see Joseph Lanza, Elevator Music, Quartet, 1994. The prevention of aircraft noise and other related matters (as opposed to music for airports), is covered in D. N. M. Starkie and D. M. Johnson, The Economic Value of Peace and Quiet, Saxon House/Lexington Books, 1975. As the authors write in their introduction, “The simple fact is that noise exists because some people directly or indirectly benefit from it...some...would find repugnant ideas that peace and quiet should be subjected to monetary evaluation. Although we do not share this view, we can understand it. Noise is an emotional issue and many people are seriously disturbed by it.” (pp. ix – xi).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Brian Eno, Discreet Music, Obscure Records, 1975 (also included with the CD version).
17. On Asda and other stores’ use of background music and radio see John Hatfield, “The tills are alive...”, Scotland on Sunday, 20th October, 1996. A recent radio programme about Asda, Esprit de Corps, presented by John Waite and broadcast on Radio 4 on Monday, 3rd August, 1998, included a member of Asda’s staff talking about the station.
19. George Steiner, In Bluebeard’s Castle, Faber, 1971, p. 89.
Modern art, it is commonly believed, has a duty or mission to disrupt or disturb. Notoriety for the artist and the instigation of irritation and anger amongst those who constitute the audience for contemporary art has become, at least, a legitimate part of the game, a presumption, almost, as to how artworks should operate and of how artists are supposed to behave. The audience expects, desires even, to be shocked and the artists, willing to be part of this spectacle they have themselves largely created, are often more than willing to comply.

The history of what is now almost a tradition of disruption is well documented. John Cage's 4'33" of 1952, his so-called "silent" work, is frequently read as a "limit point" within twentieth century music's volatile radicalisation of musical means. What most distinguishes this composition is Cage's taking of musical innovation to an extreme to which no other composer has dared to go. Proposing that a piece of music may be silent is in a certain sense more outrageous than bringing into the field, as has frequently happened within Modernism, new compositional structures, materials or musical techniques. The holding back of music within a musical text seems to be the most pompous and tasteless of actions, the final insult, as it were, in a century of attacks upon the acceptable boundaries of aesthetic form.

But to view 4'33" in this way is, as Larry J Solomon and others have argued, a gross misreading. [1] The work may alternatively, and I think correctly be considered as a return to a more convincingly musical means of listening. Although well-known for his playful temperament Cage, in the present case, was nothing if not intensely serious in intention and effect.

For one thing, 4'33" is in many ways an unexceptional musical object. It was made public in the usual manner, through performances and the publication of a score, indeed several scores, and a number of recordings of the piece have been released, though often to Cage's dismay. [2] Structurally, it is comprised of three distinct sections (paralleling the traditional sonata form), lasting, respectively, 30 seconds, 2 minutes 23 seconds and 1 minute 40 seconds, the whole totalling 4 minutes and 33 seconds. (This neat congruity of title and duration is certainly unorthodox). It was premiered in New York on August 29, 1952 when it was performed at the piano by David Tudor, who indicated the beginning and ending of the sections by opening and closing the piano lid at the appropriate points in time. 4'33" was not, however written exclusively for piano, a point emphasised by Cage's stipulation that the work is "for any instrument or combination of instruments". [3] Such vagueness may provide the would-be performer with some difficulties but encourages, too, ingenuity and invention. These terms fit well with a claim often expressed by Cage, which is that music is all around us if we are only able to recognise it, an attitude involving a perceptual rather than a technical adjustment within music. [4] The audience for 4'33" is required to adapt to this admittedly unconventional work by giving their attention to the ambient noises audible within the "frame" that is the piece, treating natural sounds - wind, birdsong, the patter of rain - or any other noises with the attention otherwise reserved for orthodox music. Indifferent to "self-expression" Cage instead creates a space for an active hearing of aural details otherwise unnoticed, let alone listened to. In this sense, 4'33" enacts a radical pause, marks out a small but powerful break in the proceedings of day to day experience whilst at the
same time vividly bringing that experience to our attention. Now over 50 years old, this work takes on, in our incessantly brash and noise-polluted culture, an increasing significance. [5] Back in the 1950s and '60s Cage was talking and writing about how there was literally no such thing as silence, no way to escape the babble of noises that surround us, that are evident, even in the processes of one's own body's essential operations. Celebrating this rather than fencing off such sounds as much as might be possible, 4'33” is a way of asking us to accept our environment as a kind of relentless artistic outpouring and, as such, operates to break down the boundaries between "art" and "life".

In attending to silence or absence as something of significance Cage is by no means alone, and there are many parallels to be found in the art of the last 100 or so years. Robert Rauschenberg's White Paintings from 1951 are an acknowledged influence upon 4'33”, as is the poetry of Mallarme, whose Un Coup de Des of 1887 emphasises the blank spaces between words as much as the words themselves. In "Murke's Collected Silences" (1966) Heinrich Boll narrates the tale of a radio station operative who indulges in listening to the silences captured on magnetic tape during those moments when people being interviewed pause for thought. [6] And, very importantly, there is Marcel Duchamp, Cage's close friend for some 25 years, whose idea that what created the work of art was not something intrinsic to the object itself but, was, rather, the attention given to it by the context in which it was displayed. In pointing to the power of the frame or context over that which it enclosed, Duchamp, at the beginning of the last century, set a precedent, a new framework within which artists, including Cage, could productively work. In applying these and other insights to the musical sphere 4'33” quietly but insistently requests that we listen, and listen again to the persistent, if overlooked music in which we are continually immersed.

Notes


2. Since actual performances of 4'33” involve, as it were by definition, unique combinations of sounds, recordings go against the spirit of the work, which is implicitly open. Wayne Marshall's studio recording (Floating Earth, 1991) is a case in point. On the matter of the different scores Cage produced for 4'33 see the text by Solomon cited in note 1.


4. Cage's ideas on music are available in a series of books, the most influential of which is his Silence, MIT Press, 1966. The literature about Cage is extensive but see, for a general account of his importance, Michael Nyman, Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond, Studio Vista, 1974.


Reinvention Without End: Roland Barthes

Mute, No 26, Summer/Autumn 2003

In her obituary of Roland Barthes Susan Sontag observed that Barthes never underlined passages in the books he read, instead transcribing noteworthy sections of text onto index
cards for later consultation. In recounting this practice Sontag connected Barthes aversion to this sacrilegious act of annotation with "the fact that he drew, and that this drawing, which he pursued seriously, was a kind of writing." [1] Sontag was making reference to the 700 or so drawings and paintings left by Barthes - usually regarded as a literary critic and social commentator - at his death as the result of a road accident in 1980. Occasionally reproduced in his books, most visibly on the cover of Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (1975) but never exhibited during his lifetime, these paintings were, as Barthes himself pointed out, the work of an amateur. "The Amateur", he noted, "engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition...he establishes himself graciously (for nothing) in the signifier: in the immediately definitive substance of music, of painting...he is - he will be perhaps - the counter-bourgeois artist." [2]

If Barthes was happy to be an amateur he nonetheless gave this word the weight of a serious critical designation. The practice of an amateur is "counter-bourgeois" insofar as it manages to escape commodification, having been made for the pleasure implicit in production itself, rather than for monetary gain or cultural status. Barthes' paintings relay an indulgence in the materiality of the brush or pen as it moved across the support, in the body's engagement with the texture of paint, the physical trace of a shimmering track of ink or a riotous collision of colours. "I have an almost obsessive relation to writing instruments", he reflected in 1973. "I often switch from one pen to the other just for the pleasure of it. I try out new ones. I have far too many pens - I don't know what to do with all of them." [3] For Barthes, who wrote all his texts by hand, this concern with the tools of writing was connected with his experience and recognition of the intimate materiality of artistic production. Each day he found time to sit at the piano, "fingering" as he called it, and had taken singing lessons in his youth and acted in classical Greek theatre whilst a student at the Sorbonne in the 1930s. The "corporeal, sensual content of rock music...expresses a new relation to the body", he told an interviewer in 1972: "it should be defended." [4]

Barthes' perceptive analyses of French culture, collected together in Mythologies (1957), were, like his other early writings, overtly Marxist. This approach was later superseded by one in which his prose mimicked the ostensible neutrality of scientific discourse. S/Z (1970), for example, mapped five cultural codes onto a Balzac short story which had been divided up by Barthes into 561 fragments or "lexias", the text being taken to pieces as though it were being examined in a laboratory. His tour de force semiological study of The Fashion System (1967) had relied on a similarly "objective" approach to the linguistic niceties of fashion writing. But the practice of the later Barthes - the Barthes of The Pleasure of the Text (1973), A Lover's Discourse (1977), and Camera Lucida (1980) - revealed the earlier publications to be complicated machines for the generation of diverse forms of language, modes of writing, as opposed to "matter of fact" commentaries or critiques. When considered together as a corpus or oeuvre, Barthes numerous books suggest an emphatically idiosyncratic individual and author whose "political" and "scientific" writings were but elements in a constantly shifting trajectory, stages in a literary career whose central motivation was the repeated reinvigoration of language. Like that of Proust, whose work he described as being for him "the reference work...the mandala of the entire literary cosmogony" [5], Barthes' life might be said to be inseparable from the practice of writing. "The language I speak within myself is not of my time", he mused in The Pleasure of the Text; "it is prey, by nature, to ideological suspicion; thus, it is with this language I must struggle. I write because I do not want the words I find..." (p. 40). This act of writing was not so much a reflection of the "self" Barthes
happened to be at a given moment as a means of self-invention, of, in fact, reinvention without end. To work on language was, for Barthes, to work upon the self, engaging with received ideas, cultural stereotypes, and cliches of every kind in order to overthrow or reposition them, moving around and through language into another order of action and effect. "All his writings are polemical", suggests Sontag, but a strong optimistic strand is clearly evident too: "He had little feeling for the tragic. He was always finding the advantage of a disadvantage." [6]

But if one was, as a human being, condemned to relentlessly signify, to make, and be oneself made into "meanings", Barthes seriously pursued in his watercolours and assiduous scribbles the impossible position of the exemption of meaning. If these paintings are "a kind of writing", they are forgeries, fragments of false tongues and imaginary ciphers, closer to what Barthes himself termed "texts of bliss", rather than "texts of pleasure", though positioned somewhere between the two.

This opposition, which runs through The Pleasure of the Text, defines texts of pleasure as constituting an attractive but ultimately mundane aesthetic form, whilst those of bliss or, in the French, jouissance, comprise a radical break, not merely within language but within the very fabric of culture itself. Such a binary opposition can be found elsewhere in Barthes' writings. The terms "studium" and "punctum" in Camera Lucida are a case in point, the former referring to the commonality of photographic representations with which we are today surrounded, whilst "punctum" designates a puncture or disturbance in the viewer. "A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an immense mutation of my interest...By the mark of something, the photograph is no longer "anything whatever"." (p. 49) With such an emphasis on the reader's or viewer's individual response Barthes moved closer and closer to autobiography and the subjective format of the jotting or journal. Most famous for his 1968 essay "The Death of the Author", the acutely particular tone of Barthes' writing later appears to contradict the loss of authorial authority celebrated in this immensely influential work. [7]

Of all the different "Barthes" we can see in his writings, that of "writer" - rather than as "critic", "literary historian" or "structuralist" - looks to be the most succinct definition one can employ. He is finally all these things and none, "a subject in process", to use a term from his student Julia Kristeva. [8] Yet Barthes recognised that the artist or author can never control meaning, that the last word always belongs to someone else: "to write is to permit others to conclude one's own discourse, and writing is only a proposition whose answer one never knows. One writes in order to be loved, one is read without being able to be loved, it is doubtless this distance which constitutes the writer." [9]

Notes


2. Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 52. All dates for Barthes' books given in the text are those of the original French editions. Dates for English translations, from which quotations are taken, are supplied in these notes. Several hundred of Barthes' paintings are reproduced in the catalogue Roland Barthes: Carte Segni, Electa (Milan), 1981.


"Once the Process artist has decided on a systematic method", noted John A Walker in 1975, "his behaviour becomes automatic, and the results are accepted without regard to their visual appeal." (Art Since Pop, Thames and Hudson, 1975, p. 14) Walker's designation "Process artist" never caught on but his phrase at least reminds us that thirty years ago one of the most radical developments in art involved placing an acute emphasis upon how an artist made his or her work, rather than upon what exactly resulted from the process employed. Indeed, in its most radical moments, Conceptual Art (as it came to be called) strove to question the assumptions, interests and established edges of art practice as they were then defined. It was an examination that did not flinch from scrutinising the institutions making up the market for art: curators, dealers and collectors, galleries and museums, critics, catalogues and magazines. In short, the whole plethora of contexts and effects that determine the reception (and preservation) of works of art underwent analysis and critique. What had previously been seen as the natural end result of the artist's practice, a coherent, product or work of art, was deemed by artists to be of less significance than the means of its materialisation. Conceptual Art's implicitly introspective pose froze the moment of art's making, rendering the methodology of production at least as significant as, if not more important than a tangible, marketable result.

It's apparent from looking at first wave Conceptualism today that those commercial institutions so extensively attacked in the 1960s and '70s were much more durable entities than the radical artists of the time understood. Conceptual Art failed to destroy the market for art as commodity and vehicle of viable economic investment. The expansion of the definition of art was met by an equally elastic modus operandi on the part of galleries and collectors, so that what had first appeared something impossible to purchase and store became, in quite a short time, easily managed. Statements and photographs replaced actual works as items of commercial exchange. If these pieces of paper were mere ciphers of works too ethereal to be physically bought and sold they were nonetheless plausible substitutes for the works themselves. One could own an "idea" through possessing its documentation, the latter serving as a device through which one could access - even if only in nominal form - the still apparently authentic trace of the artist's hand or mind. Conceptualism not only stretched beyond recognition art's defining features, it concurrently broadened the recuperative potential of the market, so that what appeared threatening and transgressive remained, in the long run, conventional and contained.

If, then, "process" and "product" were for a time essentially opposed, these distinct states of existence were soon reconciled. The massive expansion of the market has meant that virtually any artwork or procedure can be objectified; what remains from this collision of values is, however, a fundamental ambiguity, a kind of possibility for and within the practice
of art. One no longer has any need to proclaim radical intentions as a way of justifying an interest in process for its own sake; or rather, the anti-commercial involvement in process that developed within Conceptual Art may be understood as only one aspect of such a concern.

Yet the very factor of the rise in status of artistic processes, their "equal billing" with the completed work raises some difficult questions. How should one regard a situation in which the resulting "object" may well be a less engaging thing than the methodology of its production? Is the prioritising of process an acceptable stance for the artist to take? The audience may require something other than a foregrounding of technique or "thought process" when encountering the results of the artist's labours. Art is ultimately a public activity and the issue of the artist's responsibility therefore looms large. Perhaps part of this position involves the staking out of new possibilities for the reader or viewer, demanding an intensely participatory engagement with whatever the artist chooses to present.

On the other hand, a deep investment in process, in a chain of constructive actions and "clues" for further development may well lead the artist into hitherto unexplored territory. Focusing upon process, seeing where it will lead regardless of the desire to generate a "finished" work is one way of expanding artistic practice. Taken to an extreme such a position blots out all concern for the narrow expectations aligned to the artwork as would-be product. Commercial culture wants the safe bet of an easily consumable object but a responsible indulgence in process, when it stands as an analogue of serious practice, may be the most productive of investments (in the widest meaning of these terms), both for the individual artist and for culture as a whole.

Engaging Textual Spectres: Harry Price's The End of Borley Rectory

Harry Price's *The End of Borley Rectory*, his second book on what came to be known as "the most haunted house in England" was published in 1946 and ran into several reprints. [1] Borley, a tiny village sixty miles from London on the Suffolk/Essex border, had a population of around only 140 people when Price, "the famous psychical researcher", was carrying out his investigations there in the 1930s and '40s. [2] The Rectory itself, a large house of some thirty rooms was built in 1863 and was destroyed by fire in 1939. Peter Underwood describes it as having been a "gaunt, ugly, isolated monstrosity approached by a winding, lonely, overshadowed country lane", the overall impression being "grotesque and ominous". [3] Closely associated with the Rectory is Borley Parish Church, a twelfth-century construction still in use today. It is located near to where the Rectory once stood, just across the lane that is Borley's main thoroughfare. After the Rectory's destruction various unorthodox occurrences said to have taken place within the house supposedly transferred themselves to the interior, and the immediate environs of the church.

The list of allegedly supernatural incidents and apparitions with which Borley is linked is extensive: voices and footsteps overheard with no one present to produce such sounds, bottles materialising in mid-air and smashing on the ground, pebbles and other objects hurled at individuals by invisible assailants, keys spontaneously ejecting from locks, an
anachronistic horse and carriage crossing moonlit fields, a spectral nun spotted gliding above the ground, writing appearing on walls directly addressing one of the Rectory's occupants and requesting "light", "mass" and "prayers", the sound of a "padding dog", noxious smells for which the source could not be traced, and the vigorous ringing of bells even though all the bell cords in the house had been disconnected. Domestic objects would mysteriously disappear or suddenly be found where none had previously been located, most notoriously a large French dictionary and, on another occasion, a wedding ring. Shadowy figures were encountered in ill-lit hallways when the official occupants were sure they were alone in the building, room temperatures would suddenly plummet; lights inexplicably appeared in the windows of empty rooms. "The nun was seen again", remarks Price;

many footsteps and similar sounds were heard; raps, taps, and knockings were frequent; there were many paranormal movements of objects, and appearances, disappearances, and reappearances of strange articles; a luminous phenomenon; pleasant and unpleasant odours; sensation of coldness; tactual phenomena; etc., etc. [4]

What's odd about these lines is the way Price presents the apparent visitation of the ghostly nun as a factual description, as though no one would even consider that either he, or the people living in the Rectory, and from whom Price received semi-regular reports, might just be making it all up, or at least be the victims of their own over-active imaginations. Price seems to assume, in The End of Borley Rectory, that the book's audience will be quite uncritical of his rather elaborate, decidedly outrageous claims for Borley, extremely open-minded or otherwise entirely lacking in what would be a healthy dose of scepticism towards such ultimately unsubstantiated assertions as those with which Price liberally laced his books. "The Most Haunted House in England" was a best-seller; some two-hundred reviews of this work had appeared in the press and it must have been obvious to Price by the time he came to write the second volume on Borley that there was indeed a large audience which would purchase and read further works on this most spectacular example of a supposedly haunted house. [5]

Although Price purported to be investigating "two thousand phenomena" connected with the Rectory much of his prose poses a question, not so much about the authenticity of the haunting as one concerning, rather, Price's own position with respect to Borley and its copious ghosts. [6] "The Most Haunted House in England" had triggered a minor craze in the years following its publication, and the second book succeeded in directing even more attention towards this most curious of cases. Price was working on a third volume on Borley when he died in 1948.

These books, together with Price's general approach to the alleged haunting have been the subject of several substantial critiques, notably by Trevor H Hall and his associates, and by Robert Wood. [7] Hall refers to Price as "a devious writer and a manipulator of evidence" [8], and it is Wood's view that "the entire Borley haunting...is based on nothing more than unscrupulous sensation-seeking on the one hand, and credulity on the other." [9] Wood's biography of Marianne Foyster - around whom many of the quirky occurrences seemingly manifested themselves - presents her as one of the two most significant tricksters involved in the case, the other being Price himself. Marianne, argues Wood, was a compulsive liar and, like Price, used Borley - and in a way used Price - to feed her desire for attention and in
order to enliven a rather lonely, tedious life as the wife of her elderly, arguably very susceptible husband Lionel, who was vicar at the Rectory from 1930 - 35.

Whether Price (who was an expert conjurer) in fact faked the ghostly ongoings at Borley or whether he actually believed he'd stumbled across a genuinely haunted house, he nevertheless was at pains to emphasise the honesty of the witnesses he cites. Referring to Lionel Foyster, Price writes: "He...sent me a copy of his diary, in which every untoward event was accurately chronicled" [10], surely a statement which is open to easy dismissal since he - Price - is discussing incidents which he admits he did not himself witness. "Mr Foyster", he continues, "has neither exaggerated nor dramatized his adventures." [11] How could Price know whether or not Foyster was making up the things he wrote about in his diary? He could not know either way unless he had other sources of information pertaining to the same phenomena Foyster "reports", but such potentially corroboratory material is not referred to except in a rather general way, as though to imply that if other witnesses were cognizant of similar incidents as those noted by Foyster, then what Foyster claimed to have happened must be true. This "logic" is seriously flawed. Price asserts that

It can be said without fear of contradiction that the Foyster occupation coincided with the noisiest, most violent, and most dangerous period in the whole recorded history of the Borley manifestations. [12]

Perhaps this is an accurate statement, yet if it is so it does nothing to support the ostensible authenticity of Foyster's diary notes, so much as merely reiterate the possibility that either Foyster or Marianne, or both of them working in unison consciously manufactured the many outrageous events reported at Borley Rectory in the early 1930s.

Price frequently appends to his descriptions of unorthodox incidents a sort of exclamation of incredulity, as though it must follow that if he can't find a conventional explanation for peculiar happenings, then there just isn't one to be had. The absence of a normal explanation is presented as indisputable proof of paranormal involvement:

Another strange phenomenon was the sudden and simultaneous projection of the keys from their locks. Several rooms opened out on to the hall and adjacent passages. The locks had keys, and frequently, in full light, some of the keys would suddenly be propelled from their locks simultaneously. I witnessed this typical Poltergeist phenomenon once, when, I think, four of the keys were shot out in this way. Of course I examined everything, but there was no normal explanation. Trickery was impossible. [13]

And again, a few pages later and in connection with the same type of incident Price observes: "Then the keys of the library and drawing-room fell simultaneously to the floor. We could find no explanation of these truly Poltergeist phenomena." [14] The inference of ghostly interference remains more a point of rhetoric than a nugget of positive proof.

One of the most consistently made claims in The End of Borley Rectory is that its author went out of his way to obtain objective information about the events he included in his books. Price, although a layman, found that he was eligible to rent the Rectory himself, and did so for a period of twelve months during 1937 - 38. "I had", so he states,
a particular object in view when I rented the Rectory. I wanted to introduce to the place a fresh set of people who had never heard of Borley; people who were sceptical, cultured, and educated - preferably of the academic type. I wanted to eliminate from active participation in the case all those - including myself - who had had any contact with the Rectory or its occupants. I wanted to make a fresh start, as it were, with a fresh set of minds, in order to see whether the phenomena would persist under the new scientific conditions that I determined to impose. [15]

That rather loaded phrase crops up again as if to reiterate the case for an objectivity that Price cannot, for all his efforts, convincingly present as being impervious to dispute:

But I will say at once that most of the phenomena were experienced under scientific conditions. [16]

Part of the "proof" employed by Price relies on the strict social ranking in operation in the first half of the twentieth century. Being "cultured" or "educated" or an academic gives, so Price assumes, a weight to the purported evidence that it might not otherwise obtain:

The nun has been seen over and over again by various cultured and intelligent people. And my evidence, in time, ranges from 1885 to 1943. I have the evidence of at least seventeen people that they saw, singly or collectively, the figure or apparition of the nun. [17]

Here the frequency or repetition of the phenomena carries, I think, greater weight than the matter of the observers' rank, education or social position, though Price wants both types of evidence to be emphasised, and to reinforce, through their juxtaposition, the overall level of plausibility with respect to Borley's splendidly spooky reputation. But he never fails to foreground academic connections whenever he can. There is "Mrs A. C. Henning (who, by the way, is a B.A. of London University)", for example. [18] It is hard to take such status-labels so seriously today, though at the time Price was writing the world of academia was apparently more respected than would seem to be the case at the present time. [19] The following lines demonstrate what amounts to a kind of desperation on Price's part to be taken seriously by his readers and by the scientific and academic communities.

This evidence, plus the testimony of the hundred witnesses whose names are given in The Most haunted House in England, plus the additional corroborative and documentary reports that I have reproduced in the present volume, make the Borley case outstandingly the best-evidenced, the best-authenticated, and certainly the most-documented story of a "haunted house" in the annals of psychical research. And no other case has been investigated for so long a period (sixteen years), or by so many cultured people of repute, or so thoroughly. [20]

Price's high regard for academic respectability is discussed at some length in Hall's Search for Harry Price. Price himself insists on the importance of regarding psychical research as a subject worthy of the weighty recognition that university connections can impart to a field of study. "My only regret concerning the Borley case", writes Price in the closing pages of his second book on this theme,

is that some university department, or the Royal Society, did not officially take the Rectory under its wing, investigate the phenomena independently, and issue an
official report on its findings. Unfortunately the Borley hauntings occurred about fifty years too soon for official Science, and it was left to disinterested investigators at their own expense, to put on record a complete history of the Rectory phenomena. If the Borley affair had been made public at the end of the twentieth century, instead of at the beginning, some university or other (probably Cambridge, as it is so near) would have sent their best physicists, psychologists, and physiologists to the Rectory, and would have issued a voluminous report, explaining everything. I say this because I do believe that in fifty years' time we shall know a great deal more about these matters. [21]

Nothwithstanding the numerous critical points one can easily make about The End of Borley Rectory, the book remains an entertaining and in some ways exciting read. This is because it conveys a complicated range of interlocking themes with a conviction that is, if not entirely plausible from the viewpoint of scientific rigour or blunt factuality, engaging and endearing. Its "conviction" or coherence is not that of scientific prose (which is in any case a kind of fiction), but of what Roland Barthes has termed "the novelistic without the novel". [22] Price's old-fashioned writing style is clear and concise, his subject containing all the traits of the classic ghost story. If one treats the book as a work of fiction, as a network of striking story-fragments, an accumulation of reports, descriptions, incidents, memories and recognitions associated with, but not the indisputed truth of a particular place and time, then it is possible to regard The End of Borley Rectory as a rich and provocative compendium of images, a text worthy of engagement irrespective of Price's demand that one read his book as though it were an objective, semi-scientific report. [23] Several varieties of writing are employed and incorporated into Price's narrative: extracts from letters and diaries, quotations from interviewees, transcripts of planchette sessions, scientific charts and comparative lists and, intriguingly, a series of 140 short phrases which run along the top of most of the right-hand pages of the book summarising, in a factual yet poetic form, the contents of the particular page at hand. [24] Together, this collation of writing types allows Price's book to be read as an arguably fascinating amalgam of linguistic codes in which the overall effect is never finally reducible to the pedestrian discourses of fact and fiction, speculative reportage, or to the enthusiastic half-delusions of an intensely personal quest.

Notes

1. "The Most Haunted House in England", Longmans, Green and Co, 1940; The End of Borley Rectory, Harrap, 1946. Price claims on p.15 of the 1946 book that the phrase "the most haunted house to England" was one used by a "bystander" in Sudbury market square when Price stopped there on June 12, 1929 to ask directions to Borley - it was his first visit to the place and the first time he had heard the Rectory described in this way. He would, he wrote, hear the expression being used "many times afterwards." (p. 15).

2. This description of Price is from Peter Underwood, A Gazetteer of British Ghosts, Pan, 1973, p. 34.

3. Ibid., p. 34.

4. The End of Borley Rectory, p. 39. All quotations from Price in the present essay are from this work and will be referenced as "Price", with the appropriate page number, in the notes below.

5. The figure of 200 reviews is given by Price in The End of Borley Rectory, p. 66.

6. Price estimated that during the Foysters' residency at the Rectory "at least two thousand Poltergeist phenomena were experienced" (The End of Borley Rectory, p. 47).

12. Price, p. 64.
15. Price, p. 38. Price provided his volunteers with a booklet (known as "The Blue Book") outlining what equipment they should bring to the Rectory, as well as giving detailed instructions as to how to examine the building, what to do if one saw anything untoward, how to keep records, etc. The booklet also briefed the volunteer on what he or she might see or hear whilst on duty, thus acting as a means of influencing the supposedly neutral observers, even as Price claimed to be taking up a non-influential position with respect to the methods utilised in his research. A transcript of the Blue Book's contents is included as Appendix B of "The Most Haunted House in England" (pp. 194 - 197).
17. Price, p. 22.
19. In The New Idea of a University (Haven, 2001) Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson convincingly argue that the British Universities have, in recent years, prioritised their attempts to become commercial enterprises over their previously established devotion to independent scholarly research. For a review of this book see Peter Suchin, "This Year's Module", Variant, Vol. 2, No. 16, Winter 2002.
23. A number of different image formats are included in Price's book. Scattered throughout the text itself are a number of maps and plans of Borley and of the layout of the Rectory, as well as tracings of wall writings and other odd markings. Among the twenty-six photographs are pictures of the house and the church (interior and exterior shots), as well as reproductions of various curiosities discussed by Price - S H Glanville's "locked book" of private information pertaining to Borley, the summer-house built for the express purpose of looking out for the nun, walls and an envelope bearing messages to Marianne, and two images of a brick apparently hovering in mid-air.
24. These phrases comprise a supplementary or alternative index to the one placed in the usual position at the end of the volume. The technical term for this running text is the "head-line". Oliver Simon points out that "The right-hand head-line is, on occasion, a heading, epitomizing the main subject-matter of each page, and would consequently be supplied by the author. The head-line serves several purposes, the most important being that it enables the reader to pick up a chapter or section of the book and speedily find a rough indication of what is in the page." (Oliver Simon, Introduction to Typography, Penguin, 1945 (revised 1954)). The head-lines in The End of Borley Rectory are often so quirky as to render this function of summarising a page or section rather obtuse. The following examples are from this book, though a similar device was used by Price in the 1940 Borley book and in his autobiography, Search for Truth, Collins, 1942.

"THE "CHATTERING MEN"
"THE VOLATILE FIREPLACE"
"FIREPROOF GHOSTS"
"TWO THOUSAND PHENOMENA"
"A "DESPERATE DAY""
"THE "ETERNAL EVASION"
"AN INVISIBLE WALKER"
"NUN- GHOST SEEN COLLECTIVELY"
"THE VOICE IN THE GARDEN"
"FOOTSTEPS ON THE "HOLLOW" ROAD"
"END OF THE "GOTHIC" SUMMER-HOUSE"
"AN AMBULATORY ENTITY"
In Another Moment: Conflicted Legacies of Conceptual Art
Richard Grayson et al, This Will Not Happen Without You, Sunderland, 2007

This essay considers the context out of which emerged the radical curatorial practice presently operating as Locus+, more exactly the general determinants upon its previous incarnations as the Basement Group (1979-1983) and Projects UK (1983-1992). I will give my attention to the mesh of relations within which these three distinct but closely connected operations were, and are, located, in the first instance outlining contemporary art’s problematic reconciliation with the increasingly normative commercialism so prevalent today, and will attempt to give some indication of how this recuperative positioning came about. This will require discussion of what has recently been enshrined within the western art canon as “young British art” (the yBa) or “Brit Art”. This conformist institutionalising of art, its transformation into a business success story, drew of necessity upon already prevalent ideological beliefs about art and artists, reconstituting them so as to concoct an image of art which wildly misrepresents art’s actual and essential connections (and disconnections) with culture as a whole. I will contrast this markedly bleak complicity with an entirely different taking up of resources from Conceptual Art and from developments in the 1960s and 1970s,
proposing that the most important legacy of Conceptual Art is to be found within the variegated art-related practices generated in the late 1970s and 1980s. Conceptual Art was an optimistically disruptive phenomenon, one successfully tamed by its reframing as “Brit Art”. The aim of the present text is to recall another moment, a period in which cultural norms were extended and enriched by the potent force of Conceptual Art, not spectacularly repackaged as the province of the profit-seeking, the ignorant and the inane.

In an interview published in 1997 John Stezaker, one of the instigators, during the early 1970s, of Conceptual Art in Britain, made a series of critical remarks regarding recent developments within what one might term a mannerist conceptualism. According to Stezaker, this new or second-wave conceptualism left much to be desired, many of its practitioners falling into an error which, whilst admittedly being one rehearsed by first-wave Conceptual Art, continued to be repeated ad nauseum in the 1990s. "I think the problem with a lot of contemporary conceptual art", said Stezaker, "is exactly the same problem as [with] early conceptual art, in that it is unfortunately exhausted by its own ends. It operates by strategy alone, and the strategy either works or it doesn’t, hence we have so many one-shot artists who have one good idea and that’s it…the outcome is perfectly predictable." [1]

Whether or not Stezaker wished to imply that Conceptual Art is or was a practice implicitly laced with problems and contradictions is unclear. What is apparent today, however, is that the position of Conceptual Art in relation to art practice generally and, importantly, with respect to the broader culture has, since the beginning of the 1990s, shifted considerably. This was clear to Stezaker ten years ago, and the transformation is now even more deeply entrenched. What had started out as a radical realignment of art and its institutions became, within a fairly short period of time, a kind of institution itself, a fixed, over-simplistic and easily replicable way of making and thinking about art. This mannerist confabulation was in no sense good for either art or the artist, a point that Stezaker was keen to emphasise:

What is being produced [today] is a very real limitation on the role of the artist. [The artist] is actually in much the same position as the advertising executive coming up with a good idea, the merger is almost complete now, and therefore art just becomes another of the image-structures of the media culture that we live in. Rather than being a confrontation with the peculiarity of the culture…art becomes implicated in cultural turnover. Some of the earliest figures that have been associated with so-called young British art are already half forgotten figures, two years later. I don’t think I’m being conservative and old fashioned when I say that this is a very, very severe limitation in terms of the role that it gives to artists. And perhaps the merger with the strategies of media culture have become so indistinct now that they’re interchangeable which is a very frightening thought. I think we may now be falling victim to that position. [2]

What had happened to art and culture in Britain during the few years between the flurry of activity we now call Conceptual Art and the materialisation and institutionalisation of an establishment version of “radical” art was that the broader culture had suffered the effects of a number of far-reaching shifts in political power, social attitudes and general expectations. I take Stezaker’s negative description of the debilitating role and power of the artist to be accurate, as is his rendition of the disintegration of distinct cultural and social categories, and the concomitant trivialisation of art. The commercial success of what has come to be known as “Brit Art”, “young British art”, or the “yBa”, far from being an opening up and a genuine
democratising of artistic values, has turned out to be proof of art’s political containment, its miserable emasculation. As Stezaker notes, young artists have gained incredible fame in recent years, only to be dismissed and all but forgotten within a time span hitherto reserved for pop stars and highly promoted fashions or brands. In his book on the yBa Julian Stallabrass rightly describes the products of Brit Art as constituting “an art that looks like but is not quite art, that acts as a substitute for art”, since in a world dominated by business and advertising what is regarded as important is not that something is “genuinely” art, so much as that it must signify as “art”, carrying out the functions of what an increasingly corporate-driven society requires art to be. [3]

A full account of the market-based success of young British art would require a complicated and extensive exposition. In the present context a few lines from Stallabrass will have to serve as a summary of Brit Art’s most prevalent features, supplemented by some fairly generalised remarks. “There is certainly no common programme to this art”, writes Stallabrass;

There are no manifestos, no group statements, no shared style. Yet there are distinguishing characteristics…First the overly contemporary flavour of the art, apparently breaking with the provincial air of much previous British work, or at least adding sufficient inflection to that character to allow it to appeal to an international market…Second, the artists have a new and distinctive relation to the mass media and frequently use material drawn from mass culture. Third, they present conceptual work in visually accessible and spectacular form. [4]

Stallabrass also stresses a heightened interest in fame as a prominent concern of the young British artist, a feature highly compatible with art’s new-found complicity with the mass media. What had previously been perceived as the quirky, esoteric and essentially unproductive world of fine art, became, with the acceptance of the yBa, something accessible, profitable and de rigeur. Contemporary art, or, more exactly, one particular segment of it stopped looking like an indulgent hobbyist occupation or professional layabout’s distraction and took on the status of something fashionable and “cool”. Media figures such as Matthew Collings and Gordon Burn became its frontline defenders on television and in the popular press, the former having moved from editing a respected artworld journal to being a major instrument of the mass media’s reinscription of art’s importance and value. [5]

As Simon Ford and others have argued, the construction of the phenomenon known as the yBa was a full-on marketing job, a conscious attempt to concoct a high-profile artistic avant garde for the UK. [6] The path to success was rather circuitous. In 1981 the Royal Academy had insisted that Conceptual Art was in decline and that Europe was the welcoming home of a passionately felt “return to painting”, but by 1997 this resurgence had already been relegated to ancient history as the scurrilous conceptualism of the yBa was installed in the Academy, with much accompanying pomp. [7] Academicians resigned, members of the public expressed their rancour at the insult to established taste, but in a culture wherein the image of the artist most touted in the media was that of amoral drunkard or market-sharp charlatan, such actions were only to be predicted and even encouraged. The engineering of a new avant garde in British art and its subsequent international promotion was part of a more widespread whipping up of interest in the ostensibly revived fortunes of what was in
fact an empire in decline. Suggesting that Britain was home to a thrillingly outrageous bunch of artists who had risen from the mire to challenge conventional culture, installing in its place a lively, sacrilegious, vernacular aesthetic, was part of a concerted attempt by the British State to make the UK seem an enticing place for overseas businesses to invest their money and time. Young British art even had a snazzy name, a moniker melded together from three already heavily-loaded words, and its coarse and irreverent posturings were text-book examples of anti-social behaviour of the kind sanctioned by bourgeois culture's paranoid snapshot of the artist as rank outsider, the acceptable, inevitable irritant that produced the pearl.

In March 1997 the words “London swings again” graced the cover of the right-leaning journal Vanity Fair, an assertion typical of many such statements made during the 1990s in the British media. [8] The UK so it was repeatedly claimed, had regained the fashionable, energetic prosperity of the “golden age” of 1960’s Britain, especially with respect to the country’s capital. If Damien Hirst was touted as a sort of updated David Hockney (another former bad boy artist turned good), the pop group Oasis fitted the bill as the new Beatles. Perhaps another popular ‘90’s band, Blur, was intended to be read as the revived version of the Rolling Stones? That history does not so easily repeat itself, save, as Marx notes, as farce, did not deter those who sheepishly mouthed the officially sanctioned belief in the cultural importance of exhibitions such as Freeze (London, 1988) and, as I have mentioned above, the Royal Academy’s Sensation (1997), and who uncritically flew the flag for commercially-inclined artists such as Hirst, Tracey Emin and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Meanwhile, unemployment in Britain worsened, the wealthy became much richer and the poor poorer, and the number of people sleeping rough on Britain’s streets vastly increased. Tony Blair’s New Labour government adopted and actively legitimised the values of its longstanding right-wing opponent the Conservative Party, relying more and more upon clever mass media manipulation in order to convince Britain and its observers that things in the UK were improving all the time. But who was gaining from such “improvements”? The small get-rich-quick artists at the centre of the hype? The promoters and the politicians? The already wealthy managers of British industry? In reality Britain’s public institutions were in decline, its hospitals and universities strapped for cash, the country’s historically complex system of social and cultural evaluation reduced to one wherein the only thing that mattered was economic success.

Conceptual Art came into being in the 1960s, a decade described by the historian Arthur Marwick as being of “outstanding historical significance in that what happened during this period transformed social and cultural developments for the rest of the century.” [9] Such a claim cannot be made for the 1990s nor, it would appear, for the early years of the 21st century, a time when the dominant discourse in Britain foregrounds commerce and self-interest as ostensibly ennobling conceits. It is now normal for artists, young or old, to discuss their practice and position within the artworld in terms of “making it”. The punning link with the construction of actual works is presumably unintended, the field of reference being not to artistic success per se but to an individual’s acceptance within establishment institutions. Upon close examination “making it” can be seen to be a vacuous, almost meaningless remark pointing, it would appear, to the acceptance of, within a number of key galleries, museums and collections, a given individual’s work. It means being offered solo exhibitions at major commercial galleries and having one’s work collected or displayed by institutions with international reputations, such as the Tate, the Whitechapel or the Serpentine galleries.
To “make it” is to see one’s work frequently discussed in art magazines, catalogues and books and for there to be a constant demand for the personage of the artist and for his or her “product”, both of which enjoy high visibility within the culture as a whole. One wonders, though, when exactly one can convincingly be said to have “made it”; is there any serious way to assess this? The more one considers the idea and terminology of making it, the stranger and vaguer this label looks. One can never of course be entirely happy with one’s status within such a set of relations, for there is always another important exhibition venue one just has to be shown at, or yet one more collection of note still lacking the glorious presence of the desperate-minded career-artist’s work.

The current dominance of such a conceited aspirational model as that of “making it” serves to remind us of a major difference between the art that is now positioned within contemporary culture as its most recent avant garde, and first wave Conceptual Art. Whilst the yBa and its aficionados strove only to act in an affirmative fashion with respect to the institutions of mainstream culture, Conceptual Art staked its claim to innovation and, arguably, its very raison d’etre, upon its interrogative and formally novel concepts and procedures, its decidedly critical modus operandi. An important characteristic of first-wave Conceptual Art, for example, was its sometimes violently unorthodox relation to conventional modes of exhibition and dissemination and, as an important part of this, the marketplace for art. Prior to the appearance of Conceptual Art the majority of what had hitherto been read as “art” had been formally stable and could be easily presented, distributed and collected through channels such as the “white cube” gallery space and public and private collectors, a situation that was deeply problematised by art’s transformation into what one prominent critic called a “dematerialised” state. [10] With early conceptualism the very existence of the commercial gallery itself for a time looked to be an element destined to be dispensed with. Whilst this did not in fact come about, the market gradually adapted itself not to the selling of the primary material constituting Conceptual Art but to the means used to document these often elusive works. Photographs, maps, diagrams, texts and other secondary entities were exchanged as a substitute for, or pointers to works whose properties transgressed conventional definitions of art. Even if Conceptual Art was, then, a “complex and expanded” type of art, this expansion was met by the concomitant extension of the art market so as to rein in Conceptual Art’s far-reaching repercussions. [11] To acknowledge the presence of such recuperative strategies is to recognise the pertinence of Roland Barthes’ claim that “culture…recurs as an edge: in no matter what form”; the disruption engendered by intellectually and formally ambitious art may be registered as culture’s self-renewal, a notion embedded within that of the very idea of the avant garde. [12] No such introspection or redesignation of value can be attributed to the yBa, nor to much of what has materialised in its wake. Rather, a lazy mimicry of the surface features of an earlier model has been carried out. The popularity, or at least the general reading of the yBa’s output as an acceptable version of art is a further sign of its conservativism. As something previously opposed to the entertainment industry is transformed and merges with it, its complicity with business culture demands that it is merely branded as art rather than that it carries out art’s formerly critical or innovatory dialogue with the culture and society that has produced it.

I have discussed the coming about of Conceptual Art in the 1960s and 1970s, presenting it as being of revolutionary import within the artworld context, and have noted its dramatic reappearance during the early 1990s, albeit in the bastardised form that is young British art. But somewhere between these two moments of emergence and consolidation lies an
important but obscured period, aptly described by the artist Michael Hampton as “the black hole of the 1980s”. The installing of the yBa as the only legitimate heir to conceptualism has actively encouraged a historical amnesia with respect to that downtrodden, yet impressively energetic decade. In fact the period in question is, more exactly, one that includes the latter half of the ‘70s too, when the effects of Conceptual Art began to take hold within British art schools. It is a time when the didactic potential of Conceptual Art, together with a range of attitudes and approaches to culture generally were being integrated within educational and social institutions, the radicalism of the ‘60s feeding into and, on occasion, comprehensively modifying teaching strategies as young cutting edge artists and intellectuals gained influential positions in fine art departments and universities. [14] The gradual acceptance of such developments was not without its antagonisms, and some commentators have used expressions such as “crisis” to suggest that the confrontation between different artistic, moral and social beliefs was severe. Writing in the mid-'80s Griselda Pollock referred to a “cultural generation gap”, reporting that

...in recent years there has been a recurrent crisis over the assessment of a certain kind of art practice. It is usually photo-text, scripto-visual or some such form; it is often sustained by reference to a body of cultural theories; it generally handles questions of gender, representation, sexuality. The students are often well thought of intellectually and produce theoretically developed work in complementary studies and art history. Most of the resident staff don’t like this work and can’t assess it. (They still try to do so nonetheless.)...There is in art schools a generation or two of teachers and artists whose sense of art and culture was formed at a different moment from that of their current students. Confrontation with deconstructive practices is found hard to accommodate to their paradigm of art, and its appropriate terms of assessment (such as does it move me?)" [15]

Ken Rowat, writing some five or six years before Pollock, had also noted the ambivalent situation in the art schools at that time. In his sharply-titled polemic, “The student artist as an academic outcast” he observed that

Times change…and the fine art schools have been unwilling or unable to adapt. The range of possibilities open to the student in terms of ideas and media are now so awesome that he seldom knows where or how to begin...The validity of making art objects at all has been challenged by some. The very word “art” and its associated concepts have come under the semantic scalpel and the role of the artist in society is a contentious...issue…For the modern art student an initial concern with crafts and skills has become very incidental indeed; what he needs most of all now is informed and constructive dialogue, and in most cases he is not getting it...In any other area than the practice of fine art, something useful can be done, some knowledge passed on, some technical criticism made. In no other area than fine art is the brief so staggering and the end so open. [16]

Rowat went on to argue that one solution to this difficult and bewildering state of affairs was to increase the number of part-time tutors coming into the art schools, a point echoing Pollock’s recognition that it was the visiting staff, not those who had reduced their creative output to “tinkering with [their] nice Edwardian house” (Rowat) who could understand and
support the work of students for whom Conceptual Art had been the most influential model of art-making. "We must… expose these students", Rowat suggested,

to a constant flow of ideas and visual experiences through close contact with active practitioners and thinkers in their field…all concerned must fight for a structure in which at least 75% of a fine art staff are part-timers; active, practising artists…With no longer any established discipline as a base to work from, the art student bravely faces a devastating crossfire of questions about art and life. Only those who are themselves in the thick of battle can help him.

But if there was something of a feeling of confusion and uncertainty within art education during the late ‘70s and on into the ‘80s, this was matched by a concurrent strand of optimism and a sense of immense possibility and potential. Money was in plentiful supply, and this meant that a large number of practicing artists did find work in the art schools, such visits from those “in the thick of battle” being backed up by a constant stream of visiting lecturers from a substantial range of disciplines, providing an interdisciplinary education of a unique kind. [17] Phyllida Barlow, in an interview conducted in 2006 in which she discussed changes in art education over the last forty years, acknowledged the current mean-minded, profit-centred state of higher education in the UK, whilst emphasising the immense cultural contribution made by art schools, both at the present time and “traditionally”. Her words perfectly describe the “buzz” around art education in the ‘70s and ‘80s; “…what is interesting”, said Barlow,

is that, however remote and economically up against it a fine art course might be…fine art courses have the potential to prepare students for more than a life as a visual artist. Traditionally art schools were, and perhaps still are, the seed-beds for all kinds of creative promise, for writers, musicians, film directors, performers, organizers, administrators, curators, critics, educationalists, teachers etc. It should not be under estimated what a rich resource an art school education can be. [18]

An art school education certainly was a “rich resource” in the intermediary years to which I refer. The open nature of many courses - open to unfashionable ideas, to accepting students from all walks of life, and with plenty of funding for temporary teaching staff as well as for materials and technical support – encouraged an experimental atmosphere, with very little pressure being placed upon students to succeed commercially so as to put the college on the map. There was virtually no need for students to give up considerable amounts of time to part-time employment, as reasonable grants were widely available and student loans had not been invented. Many art students signed on for Social Security benefits after leaving college, a form of economic sustenance that allowed one plenty of scope to develop one’s work, and the position of degree-level education within society was one of a thing taken up for its own sake, not for the money that having a degree might enable one to earn. [19] Rather than encourage laziness and indifference, the “anything goes” framework provided by courses in fine art militated towards a stance of self-reliance, self-organisation and productive play. Out of this ebullient field of camaraderie and co-existence came an attitude not of competition but of collaboration and shared interests, and ultimately a feeling that it was possible to operate effectively on little or no money, with one’s contribution being recognised and reciprocated within the public domain.
Innovative small-scale institutions such as artist-run exhibition spaces, which began to come into their own around this time, were very much a product of this art school “do it yourself” paradigm, an approach in turn fuelled by the recent phenomenon of Punk. [20] The Punk “aesthetic” involved a no-nonsense DIY reordering of one’s immediate environment as and when necessary. It did not require either the encouragement or validation of experts or professionals, and the word “amateur” was in effect considered a term of praise, not abuse. “In the early 1980s”, notes Jon Bewley, “Britain was a deeply politicised and divided country. We’d had Thatcher, the Hunger Strike, the Miners’ Strike and the Falklands War, and there were a lot of artists making work that reflected on the fallout from those things.” [21] The more progressive of these artist-initiated operations “had as a central tenet of their existence that the institution should be the servant of the artist” (Bewley). Institutions were not, as a form of life, defended for their own sake so much as considered a necessary evil given that economic and artistic survival within a burgeoning Thatcherite philosophy demanded the setting up of structures capable of operating within it but against it. Young artists invested their time and attention in keeping their practices going, or in developing new practices and new audiences, and the printing of business cards and the seeking out of “networking” opportunities wasn’t even on the agenda as a secondary matter, never mind as a compulsive priority, as with the generation of Hirst and Emin. The cultivation of business contacts and the egotistical self-signification as an “artist” was a matter left to, and mainly indulged in by graphic designers, whose complicit scribblings and standardised modes of address held no truck with the majority of occupants within the fine art world. The idea of a paying career as an artist looked absurd, anomalous if not impossible if one wished to retain credibility as a serious, if inexperienced artist. Nor was there such a cult of youth as has been fixed in place today; absent then too, as a part of this rather positive aporia was the currently prevalent self-doubt of the young but unsuccessful artist who thinks that if they haven’t established a burningly hot career for themselves by the time they have left college they should simply give up art and move into a more profitable, more businesslike milieu.

The founders of the seminal artist-run gallery City Racing, developed out of a London squat in 1988, referred to themselves in 2002 in the following way: “We “facilitated” as best we could. Our budget for each show was nominal. Leg work and good will was what we had most of...[we were] part of the new multidisciplinary posse, as we had our studio work and we had the gallery “job”. We were all DIY.” [22] The members of City Racing did not aggrandise themselves by calling what they did “curating”, a term that is much overused today, and their ethos was one of maintaining a space wherein work that would not be shown in a commercial gallery could get an airing. The intention was not to find a way of injecting themselves into the conventional art marketplace but to function as an alternative space of display, even if they deliberately steered clear of using that word. But today, in 2006, that which is called “alternative” is most often a form of commercialism operating under a rather tired and disingenuous designation. Whereas art schools and universities had been, until perhaps the late-’80s, places in which marginal and intrinsically intellectual or artistic interests found a safe haven, indeed immense encouragement and recognition, such institutions increasingly foreground monetary considerations over all other evaluative means; once providing a space in which to examine and step back from brute capitalist beliefs, they now avidly promote them. It is no surprise, then, that those genuinely inventive, critically rigorous and brazenly resourceful operations that were in part the product, in the ’70s and ’80s, of such support structures, remain in memory as outstanding examples, anomalies or idiosyncratic mini-institutions with their own particular interests and concomitant strategies.
for self-perpetuation. Given the present metaphysical weight attributed to the market, to commerce, and to self-aggrandisement as the only field in which it matters to succeed, it will be a long time before anything of comparable importance finds a similarly resilient, independent and unquestionably effective position in the cultural sphere.

Notes


2. Stezaker, pp 161-162.


5. Collings had previously been the editor of the now defunct journal Artscribe. Gordon Burn is the author of numerous books, including studies of the serial killers Fred and Rosemary West and a range of publications in support of Damien Hirst and the yBa.

6. For a series of detailed critiques of the yBa phenomenon see Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (Eds.), Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art, Black Dog, 1998, especially Simon Ford’s “The Myth of the Young British Artist” therein. See also Peter Suchin, “The Rise and Demise of the “yBa”: Reference and Revolt in Recent British Art”, in Krzysztof Knauer and Simon Murray (eds.), Britishness and Cultural Studies, Slask (Poland), 2000.

7. An important component of the “return to painting” ideology revolved around the exhibition A New Spirit in Painting, held at the Royal Academy, London, in 1981. In 1997 the same institution hosted Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection. Each exhibition was accompanied by a substantial catalogue.


14. An important example of this “interventionist” approach is the teaching and publishing practices of the Art & Language group (founded 1968), who made little or no distinction between their spoken and written output and that of a directly visual import. This transgressing of conventional boundaries caused considerable disruption at Coventry College of Art during 1969-1971. See Charles Harrison, Essays on Art & Language, Basil Blackwell, 1991, especially chapter 3. The value of the part-time art school lecturer is emphasised in Brighid Lowe’s “Something for Nothing?”, included in Antonia Payne (Ed.), Research and the Artist: Considering the Role of the Art School, Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, 2000.

15. This and the previous quotation are from Griselda Pollock, “Art, Art School. Culture: Individualism after the Death of the Artist”, Block, No. 11, 1985/6, p. 8.

16. This and all other quotations from Ken Rowat given here are from his “The student artist as an academic artist”, The Guardian, Tuesday, 27 March, 2006.

17. During the present author’s time as a student in the Fine Art department at Leeds Polytechnic (1979-1982) the panoply of visiting speakers included the composers Gavin Bryars and Edward Cowie, the philosopher Paul Crowther, the poet and writer on William Burroughs and American culture Eric Mottram, the musician and performance artist Genesis P Orridge, the filmmaker Sally Potter, and the playwright Snoo Wilson, as well as various artists, art historians and critics. This breadth of intellectual input was typical of many art schools during this period.

Rebel Without a Course

The press release for 'The Emaciated Spectator', an exhibition held at London's Apiary Gallery earlier this year, displayed a number of intriguing features. The rather brief description of the show was flanked not only by a quotation from the currently super-fashionable philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose book *The Emancipated Spectator* the show's title spoofs, but also by two especially solicited remarks from writers (myself and Richard Dorment) associated with an art magazine (*Art Monthly*) and an establishment newspaper (the *Telegraph*). Employing the deliberately difficult collective name PsychoanalYSL, the authors of this show were in fact a group of young artists from Goldsmiths, one not known, incidentally, for its reticence as regards the rampant promotion of its notoriously ambitious progeny.

Also embedded within this text were four already completed tick-boxes adjacent to the words Neon, Taxidermy, Fog Room and Rancière, suggesting that this piece of PR was not merely an informative device but represented what its authors regarded as the key exhibition signifiers of the moment. Indeed, the show itself, a room full of dry ice and sundry 'artistic' objects, might be read not only as a 'current exhibition' but also as a knowing, if somewhat smug, attempt at self-validation: a show about making a show within an art world deeply steeped in the machinations of fashion, self-reflexivity and hype.

Aside from the endgame introspection offered by 'The Emaciated Spectator', what other means do artists employ today to validate – that is, make active and confer the weight of some broader relevance to – their practices? What must one do to be taken seriously as an artist, and what are the mechanisms, frameworks, desires and devices involved in these activities? And if this is a situation that is not solely controlled by the artists themselves, who or what determines what is or is not perceived as art?

It is hardly a novel idea that acceptance as an artist is institutionally determined, but in recent years we have seen the development of what is arguably a pernicious and misleading validation system, commonly known as the practice- or studio-based PhD, a central component of what Mel Ramsden, writing in the journal *Art-Language* (New Series, No. 3, September 1999), called 'the delusions of professionalisation' of the art schools and broader art world.

Doctorates in fine art have been the subject of much discussion within academia in recent years and many institutions now confer them. The anthologies by Estelle Barrett and
Barbara Bolt (*Practice as Research*, 2007) and by James Elkins (*Artists with PhDs*, 2009) are but two of an apparently growing number of volumes on the subject. In his contribution to the latter, Victor Burgin lists three kinds of ideal candidate for PhDs in fine art. The first of these is 'an accomplished visual artist … who not only wants to write but is capable of writing a long dissertation'. The second is a student who has 'received a thorough introduction to a specialist academic literature as an undergraduate, but has little experience of practical work in visual arts' – someone keen to write a thesis while in close contact with artistic production, something not readily available outside departments of fine art. Burgin’s third model student is 'one who makes works of art and who also reads enthusiastically … and turns concepts encountered in reading into practical projects'. It is, Burgin argues, students of these three kinds who should be admitted to PhD programmes in fine art, and who would most benefit from them. But are these the kind of students courses are filled with, or do applicants have different expectations of what a PhD might offer?

A 1999 collection of papers on the theme of *Research and the Artist*, edited by Antonia Payne, includes a range of discussions as to the meaning and appropriateness of practice-based PhDs. Jon Thompson, for instance, remarked upon the low intellectual standards of the students he encountered within art school PhD programmes, as well as the difficulties inherent in conflating art practice (or the theory accompanying it) with scholarly research. ‘I am not at all certain,’ remarked Thompson, ‘that I know what the term “research” means when it is applied to a deeply subjective … practical subject like Fine Art’. For him the problem is compounded when such research is qualified by terms like ‘practice-based’ or ‘studio-based’. ‘Why’, he asked, ‘would any “fully-engaged artist” wish to return to university or art college in the first place in order to spend years studying for a “practice-based” PhD? Why, exactly, would they want to do that?’. One answer to Thompson's question is in order to gain the academic institution’s blessing or validation as an artist, lecturer or researcher. But whether universities can convincingly provide such an *imprimatur* is a matter open to dispute.

Although research was the issue under consideration in Payne’s book, Thomson was right to regard artists doing doctorates as part of the same problem: what may legitimately be classed as research within the university? In admitting to some confusion over what research in fine art might be, how it may be assessed and quantified in a manner common to and agreeable throughout a wide range of academic institutions, he reflected views echoed by several other contributors to *Research and the Artist*, among them Charles Harrison, Michael Baldwin and *Art Monthly* editor Patricia Bickers. ‘I am not opposed to PhDs in Fine Art *per se*’, noted Bickers. However, she pointed out that, ‘in order to fulfil the criteria for a research-based degree in any meaningful way, the fine art researcher will almost inevitably be drawn away from any meaningful practice’. ‘All fine art practice involves research at some level’, she added, ‘though the form it takes may not be quantifiable by any conventional, assessable criteria.’

Bickers and the other figures cited were sceptical about research in fine art for good reason and there is still no across-the-board agreement as to what exactly a PhD in fine art should entail. As well as a body of artistic work, one award-giving institution requires that its students produce an accompanying text of at least 40,000 words in length, while another grants the title of ‘doctor’ with a written component of only 5,000 words. Aside from this lack of concordance across the degree-awarding system, there is another problem: the model conventionally used for definitions of research in fine art is science-based. As Harrison
remarked, ‘In science, you can generally at least tell what is, and what is not, research. In the arts – certainly in the practice of art – you cannot. Claims for rigour in research in the arts tend to be couched in one of two manners: either they are weak imitations of scientific proposals, or they are defensive and poorly argued assertions of the difference of artistic concerns and priorities.’ In his conclusion, Thompson observed that if one must have practice-based PhDs then candidates should not be required to write anything at all; the self-reflexivity of the student should instead be assessed via a spoken examination. The pretence of producing something approximating a scientific report should be abandoned and replaced, Thomson argued, with ‘examination by viva in front of a jury of artists’.

An important part of the long-established criteria for conventional PhDs is the proviso that work submitted should be ‘an original work that makes a significant contribution to knowledge’. It is hard to see how an artist producing a text that contextualises issues developed through their art practice could fail to fulfil this requirement, particularly if such work has not been much written about prior to the PhD. Any examination of a body of work that has received little previous critical discussion can all too easily be regarded as successfully fulfilling the required criteria. So what, exactly, might be glamorised with the term ‘knowledge’? This question returns one to discussions about the ostensible rigour of scientific research.

It is important to give further attention to Thompson’s question about why artists might want to do a PhD at all. In speaking to artists who are considering signing up for a doctorate in fine art, all manner of idealisations of practice-based PhDs are enthusiastically expressed. One repeated response is that PhD’s are a way to continue one’s practice while getting funding and a doctorate to boot. Potential students speak of not really believing in the academic system as such, but of seeing the PhD as a way of getting access to money, libraries, workshops and a critical milieu populated by staff and students with whom they can discuss their work. It is as though the flow of such an exchange would be all one way, entirely to the candidate’s benefit: ‘I will use the institution’, they seem to be saying, ‘but it won’t use me!’ This is, despite all the positive possibilities implied by Burgin’s thoughtful approach to practice-based PhDs, a nonsense. The practice-based PhD is, through and through, an institutional device. Only a very small number of students enrolled for the qualification receive bursaries, instead many fall into considerable personal debt. And even if students are often left to their own devices during their time on the programme – sometimes leading to a degree of isolation – they nevertheless have to leap through various institutional hoops, negotiating rules of engagement that can suddenly shift with little in the way of an official explanation as to why this might be the case. Stress and disappointment are very often the corollaries of taking on a PhD. The danger that submitting one’s practice to the bureaucratic and critical scrutiny of an academic institution might distort or radically reinscribe the candidate’s practice in ways that they had not foreseen, and would not want, seems lost on many applicants. Yet if PhDs are to retain their rigour, a certain mode of selecting, ordering, arranging and rearranging must take place, with the result that the often open-ended trajectory of an artist’s practice can be made to occupy – without controversy or institutional infidelity – its place within the domain of the doctorate programme, and of the university as a whole.

What is at stake when considering artists as PhD students is the question of their relationship to the authority of the increasingly commercial and narrow-minded art schools. That is, to institutions that will, for a substantial fee, coupled with the acceptance of a range
of (self) transformations on the part of the student, confer the title ‘doctor’ onto those willing and able to appropriately modify their practice (and its linguistic adjunct) into research as nominally defined. Jacques Derrida put this very clearly: ‘The reproductive force of authority can get along more comfortably with declarations or theses whose content presents itself as revolutionary, provided that they respect the rites of legitimation, the rhetoric and the institutional symbolism which defuses and neutralises whatever comes from outside the system’, (‘The time of a thesis: punctuations’, included in Alan Montefiore (ed), Philosophy in France Today, 1983). This observation is particularly pertinent in the case of artists, since it is they who, more than any other social group, trade on notions of exceptionality, radicality and rebelliousness, and who supposedly operate well outside the parameters of normal behaviour and institutions. Even without investing too much in this romanticised image, it is plausible to think of artists as people engaged in the expansion and investigation of conventional modes of representation – activities that are not neatly classifiable, not validated by bureaucratic, managerial notions of what art is or should be.

In his report on developments stemming from student protests against government cuts in funding for the arts and humanities (Art Monthly No. 343), Dean Kenning rightly indicates that little of genuine substance is to be gained by protests which demand nothing of the government save that they reinstate the budget for arts education, so as to return us to what might sardonically be called ‘business as usual’. Though Kenning’s conclusion – to the effect that it is now time to radically challenge the increasingly commercial stance of contemporary art – may appear somewhat utopian, one might start by questioning the authority of those who attempt to demarcate what art is and should be in today’s society. One might challenge such reductionism by disaffirming, through argument and example, ‘official’ designations that are ultimately government-sanctioned. Isn’t there something terribly confused and confusing about artists who believe that engaging in ‘proper’ research will make them into ‘proper’ artists? With the current sweep of anti-intellectualism, and the attendant withdrawal of financial support, it is blatantly obvious that signing up for yet one more certificate of validation is a fool’s game.

Michael Baldwin has a different reading of what research might involve, and it isn’t one picked up from overpaid art-school managers. ‘Our sense of “research”’, Baldwin proposes (‘our’ being artists), ‘will always depend upon a certain distance between the predicates and practices of administration (including curatorial ones) and the actual artistic practices practised. What is required of these latter is a complexity and inquisitive ambition sufficient to preserve this distance. In short, they must be resistant to certain kinds of co-option.’ This idea of an artistic and politically vigilant mode of investigation is compatible neither with science nor with mainstream education, nor does it align itself with government schemes in which so-called research is remunerated according to a pseudo-Masonic hierarchy of the distribution of funds. Baldwin is critical, by implication but also directly, of artists whose practices fit neatly into the institutions – including academic institutions – that are keen to support them: ‘A remotely serviceable art practice’, he suggests, ‘will be engaged in one form or another of an emancipatory task [that will] involve trying to find ways to be free of … oppressive and unwanted conditions. And among these will be the cultural conditions that provide unchallenged hegemony for the managers.’ Such a hegemony, he goes on to say, ‘trivialises or empties the self-description of all that it touches … [robbing] what it controls of internal complexity and volatility, redescribing it in line with its own instrumental purposes’. For Baldwin, an ‘art practice with any claim to research-like power will be ‘a discursive, talkative, self-describing job of work that is resistant to assimilation by any institution it
cannot harm or at least change’. This view of academia rightly regards certain features of its modus operandi as emasculatory and restrictive rather than emancipatory. Finally, Baldwin points out that: 'The internally complex artistic products of post-Duchampian times are extraordinarily amenable to administrative priorities. We might even say they are directed at them.' (All Baldwin quotations from Research and the Artist.) This is to suggest that the once vividly volatile, and in some senses self-validating practices of Conceptual Art have become, at one extreme, largely determined by institutional sanction, relying for their very acceptance as 'art' upon linguistic frameworks generated by establishment so-called ‘experts' in contemporary art.

It is somewhat ironic, perhaps, that Baldwin, one of the founders of Art & Language, surely one of the most theory-inflected artistic collectives operating today, should speak out so vociferously against academically determined notions of research. Yet A&L, a practice that has described itself as having begun with a kitchen tabletop and a sheet of paper as the only means of making work, has been nothing if not self-determining in terms of its interrogation, beginning in the late 1960s, of conventional academic and art world paradigms of education and artistic practice. Clearing a space for itself alongside a number of other equally novel practices, A&L – partly through the production of its own highly independent publication, 'our own journal, something that we can control ... as much like a form of research activity as anything I can think of', as Harrison put it – did not wait to be told by academics or their bosses what it was or was not allowed to make and distribute under the rubric of art.

One of the problems for any consideration of artistic validation is that of what artists themselves actually want and expect in terms of structure and recognition. The professionalisation of art may look like an expansion of art’s independence but in reality it is a kind of contraction, since it is at all times encouraged by art departments that students instigate and promote their own exhibitions, frequently in spaces outside the academic institution itself. What counts here, increasingly, is the making of an art that looks like art, preferably a saleable object, something overt – pseudo-notorious, if possible – and reeking of apparent independence and individuality when in fact it is tightly prescribed by market-complicit models of comprehensible creativity. This is what 'The Emaciated Spectator’ demonstrated with such knowingness. In his brief but prescient paper ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’, 1961, Marcel Duchamp remarked that art had already, 50 years ago now, become too popular, too much of a commodity, too close to what artists suspected the public might like and want and buy. Despite Duchamp's immense status and influence, his criticisms of market-driven art are conveniently ignored by his many devoted disciples.

In a paper reproduced in The Artist and the Academy, edited by Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster in 1994, Susan Hiller, currently the subject of a major retrospective at Tate Britain, stated why as a young woman she turned down a place at the Royal College of Art: ‘Art education is not essential to the training of artists ... and art education trains many students not to be artists.’ In Britain, art schools act as conduits into the practice and profession of art, but attending them does not automatically make one an artist. No matter how many academic degrees one accumulates, whether at doctorate level or any subsequent level that may be invented as a further filtering device designed to attend to the overproduction of art students and the decline in art-related employment in the UK, one’s existence as an artist will not be conditional upon holding a higher degree. ‘The great artist of tomorrow’, as Duchamp acutely observed, ‘will go underground.’
Charlotte Higgins says “boo hiss to the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers” and calls them “spoilsports” for refusing to get involved in Martin Creed’s proposed work for the Olympic Games next July (Guardian “Arts Diary”, 16 November 2009).

Creed wanted “Work No. 1197: All the Bells in a Country Rung as Quickly and As Loudly As Possible for Three Minutes” to mark the start of the games, and for the public and bell-ringers to “ring whatever bell comes to hand at 8am on 27 July”, but the council director, quoted by Higgins, says “We are not able to work closely with this project as we believe it is misconceived ... We do not believe ringing for three minutes nor ringing as fast as possible is really suitable for church bell ringers.”

Such a position of refusal vis-à-vis Creed’s ill-thought-out project is echoed by art world scepticism regarding the value, culturally and economically, of the games. The bigger question, which Higgins doesn’t address, is why is Creed – and other renowned artists such as the Chapman brothers, Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and Bob and Roberta Smith – involved in the Olympic Games at all? Why are they giving this overindulgent spectacle their blessing?

In the art world figures such as Creed, Emin and Hirst, although occasionally feted – and no doubt envied – for their celebrity status, are not necessarily regarded as significant artists, nor are they perceived as being particularly astute, except perhaps commercially. The young British artists movement, partly because of its (manufactured) reputation as being comprised of working class rebels who “broke through” into mainstream culture, were strongly supported by Tony Blair and other politicians keen to suggest that British culture had, during his term of office, returned to a level of vibrancy not witnessed since the 1960s. This official support for what many in the art world thinks of as mediocre and inane is continued by the present government, and for the same ideological ends.

But the more these artists engage in an affirmative way with the broader culture of capitalism, the more they renounce what has long been a central responsibility of the artist – the examination, critique and renewal of culture.

Such artists ought to ask themselves why they are so keen to be involved with the Games at all, effectively supporting the huge waste of public money that the Olympics is bound to be, and especially when the government budget for the arts has been redirected to shore up this miserable corporate extravaganza. At a time of particularly vicious cuts to university arts and humanities funding, the cynical deployment of artists whose main contribution to culture resembles nothing so much as the invention of a brand, is insulting. Rather than comply with such nonsense artists should mobilise themselves against profiteering beneficiaries of the Olympics, not take on the role of quiescent performing dogs.

Given the current dishevelment of British culture, a much more appropriate opening to the Games than Creed’s ubiquitous bell ringing would be two minutes of silence.
Section Three: Book and Exhibition Reviews/Writings on Artists
According to the author of this pathetic, deceptive and obnoxiously pop tome, Gerhard Richter and Robert Morris are "dreary", David Hockney is "a strange old loony figure", and the much respected writer John Berger is "generally gittish" (pp. 23, 158, 53 and 123). These examples typify the tone of Blimey!, a book accurately described by the words Collings applies to the work of young London artists, i.e. "half coherent illiterate rambling thoughts" (p. 15). Punctuation is unpleasantly suspended unlike, alas, the all-too-many exercises in boastful ignorance: "Christine Borland. I can't remember what she does" (p. 154) is but one example of numerous example of this former Artscribe editor's know-nothing stance. Books, artists and exhibitions are "namedropped" throughout but details are thin on the ground. It's all "somewhere" and "one day" and "maybe". If ever there was a classic of incompetent art journalism this, I'm afraid, is it.

Blimey! Is the first book issued by David Bowie's publishing house "21", and if they plan to release anything else as irritating I hope it is also their last. Sections on Goldsmiths College, on artist-initiated projects, the Turner Prize, and on Emin, Lucas and their ilk make for tedious reading. It doesn't follow that this should automatically be so, but with Collings everything is asserted, nothing argued or explained. There is neither a contents list nor index. One suspects the work was planned as a handbook for would-be "hip" victims of contemporary art hype. A critical account of current London trends would we welcome but what we are given here is factually inaccurate, if copiously illustrated drivel.

The cover of Blimey! Shows Collings himself, poised with presumably mock "mad artist" wildly staring eyes. The word "superficial" comes to mind. Is the title a play on "Buy Me"? I didn't and neither should you.

The postcard is a common but indeterminate object: mass produced but privately inscribed, small but densely packed with information, a product of the 19th century invention of photography but also reliant on the much older medium of writing. It operates somewhere between the typical and the distinct, between the "official" picturing of an incident, artifact, person or place, and the individualism involved in the act of choice executed by its sender or collector. Adding an inscription to this essentially anonymous, "readymade" thing contributes a further tint of individuality. "What I prefer, about post cards," writes Jacques Derrida, "is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address". (The Post Card, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 13). Derrida's remark helps us to unpack the postcard's implicit ambivalence as a means of communication. Frequently sent from one person to another, bearing a message that may be intimate or mundane, the postcard is an open carrier, both image and text left visible for all who cross its track to see. The sender's appended text, supplementary to the image and printed script of which the card is comprised, is like a fragment of a larger
discourse or epistolary event. A message quickly scribbled, a commonplace attached, these are what often grace the back of the card, the stereotypical "wish you were here" resolutely announcing, precisely and paradoxically, the presence of the sender and the absence of the other to whom it is addressed.

The strangely uncertain status of the postcard as a "trivial" but optionally serious channel of meaning is again brought out in Derrida’s book, when he writes:

I have so much to tell you and it all will have to hold on snapshot post cards - and immediately be divided among them. Letters in small pieces, torn in advance, cut out, recut. So much to tell you, but all and nothing, more than all, less than nothing - to tell you is all, and a post card supports it well... (p. 22)

These words remind us of the postcard's family resemblance to various visual and textual devices: the cutting-up and reconstituting involved in collage, or the zooming-in and layered framing utilised in photography and film. Many works of art are today transmitted to us in the form of postcards, miniaturised souvenirs of entities remembered or perhaps, in fact, previously unseen.

In his study of the effects of the city on modern forms of selfhood, *The Fall of Public Man* (Faber, 1986), Richard Sennett observes that the city is "an instrument of impersonal life, the mold in which diversity and complexity of persons, interests and tastes become available as social experience." (p. 339). What is for a given individual a unique and isolating occurrence is, for others, the very structure of a disruption of the self that has become an ordinary component of life in the modern metropolis. Such alienation may nonetheless be, irrespective of its frequency, a disturbing facet of city life in the 20th and 21st centuries. In many cases a person's sense of identity is taken from the city in which they live, but it can easily be lost there too as one tries to negotiate the multiple impressions, colours, contours, lights, movements and sounds in their deep and frenzied penetration.

The selecting and sending of a postcard, together with its arrival and reception, might well be read as a powerful, if in a sense defensive, cycle of exchange, such personalised postal acts mapping out, but also battling against the city's omnipotent impositions. The work in the present exhibition gives a further twist to the mystery, ambiguity and beauty of this most subtle and ill-respected medium.


The Monument, located in the City of London, is a vast Doric column constructed in Portland stone, the inside of which is lined with a spiral staircase of 311 steps. Beneath the body of the column lies a substantial, ocular-shaped chamber and, just below the gilded flame gracing the top of the structure, is a small but now similarly disused room. Completed in 1677, eleven years after the Great Fire of London, the building, some 202 feet in height, stands this same distance to the east of where the fire began in Pudding Lane. The cause and consequences of the fire are open to debate. Was it started, as was claimed at the time, by the Government in order to free the city of the then raging plague, or did the conflagration...
stem from a vicious Papist plot whose aim was to overthrow the State? Conversely, might the disaster have been the result of a genuinely accidental event? In any case, the Monument has held from the beginning an ambivalent status as a marker both of destruction and loss but also of a projected revitalisation, the rebuilding, in grand style, of the decimated city. Christopher Wren, one of two architects involved in the project, wanted to place an image of a phoenix atop the building's highest point, a plan which had been rejected by the time of its actual construction.

For some years used by the Royal Society as an observatory the Monument is today primarily a place visited by tourists, who may ascend to the viewing platform for a modest fee.

Tabatha Andrews' *Mappamonumentalis* was comprised two connected elements, a circular mirror and a lengthy cord made from a modern map of London, shredded and reassembled so as to form a continuous thread. Placed at the base of the column's interior the mirror sealed off the subterranean space below it, whilst giving the illusion, when viewed from the staircase, of an "endless" column descending deep into the earth. The finely refined line of the reconfigured map, hanging freely at the centre of the shaft, shared a similarly "infinite" aspect. But from the bottom of the staircase, observing the cord close to, it could be seen to disappear into the mirror through a hole in its surface.

This act of entering the mirror afforded multiple allusions, reminding one of the mirror-doorways connecting incompatible worlds in the films of Cocteau or the stories of Singer and Carroll. Mallarme described stars as marks on a mirror, a pertinent connection given the Monument's link with Enlightenment science (Wren's design in part mimics that of a telescope). Such points of correspondence, whether deliberate or unconscious, brought to *Mappamonumentalis* a welcome complexity, a sense that this discreet, minimal intervention generated several contrasting tracks of interpretation. Even without attributing literary references to the piece the break in the mirrored lid of the hidden room could be regarded as a conduit carrying information in and out of the building's "eye", recalling the Monument's former function as a "machine for seeing". Gazing down from a few steps above the floor, the sleek "beam" seemed to slide into a frozen pool or penetrate the surface of a screen, the illusion of infinite distance being bluntly curtailed. Moving from the ocular to the aural, by way of another potential translation of the work, the line took on the image of an immense vocal "chord" suspended the entire length of the narrow chamber.

Essentially a continuous spiral form, this mutated map echoed, in reverse direction, the twist of the staircase surrounding it. Those who visited the building during the period of the installation may have regarded this device as a part of the normal furniture of the place, a plumb line or pendulum designed to detect any potential shift in alignment of the Monument itself. Close inspection revealed, however, the scrambled colours, conventions and texts of the map from which the thread had been assembled. One thus could read the presence of this line as the weaving together of two temporalities. The Monument itself embodies a memory of a distant, destroyed and irrecoverable London, whilst Andrews' loaded cord was literally an encoded, "exploded" picture of a still extant, if constantly shifting city. The metaphor of the rope, thread or cable is a generous one: it connects and communicates but it also binds and restrains.
In being presented with such a productive rearrangement of elements as those found in *Mappamonumentalis* we are encouraged to reconsider the very possibility of holding a truly accurate map, trace or memory. Indeed the plausibility of historical monuments being able to contain and protect a stable residue of meanings through time is thrown into some considerable doubt, whilst novel, provocative and playful connections are forged and affirmed.

**Carey Young, *Business as Usual*, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 2001**

According to the exhibition guide to Carey Young's *Business as Usual* Young has developed a "merged identity as both artist and businessperson and uses this as the basis of her work". In the dozen pieces showing at the John Hansard Gallery she considers the artist's position within an increasingly commercialised culture, looking at how business repeatedly attempts to "creatively transgress" its own patterns of invention and display. Young's title, especially after the horrors of September 11, is ambiguous. Is the "business" being scrutinised here that of capitalism (even if promoting "art"), or is it that, conversely, art today continues to assert its critical independence irrespective of the quenchless spread of commercial ideologies? Indeed, does art now rely upon its parasitic integration with commerce in order merely to exist at all?

Young references "classic" moments from recent or contemporary art, specifically Conceptualism, in a bid to emphasise the parallels between the "dematerialised" art practices of the 1960s and 1970s and the current business trend of selling not products but "intellectual capital" or "ideas". Individual pieces point directly to figures such as Duchamp, Beuys, Latham, and Ian Burn. Burn's "Xerox Book" of 1968 (produced by photocopying a blank sheet of paper, then copying the subsequent copies) is, for example, directly alluded to in "Force Majeure" (2001), in which 336 pages of A4 paper carrying traces of the artist's name are fixed to the wall. On the first sheet the name is clearly and centrally presented; the second is a photocopy of the first, the third of the second, and so on, the words at first becoming blurred, then, finally, fully obliterated. "Social Sculpture (for Joseph Beuys)" (2001), a "readymade" roll of office carpet, recalls Beuys' use of felt as a symbol-laden art material, whilst in "Positive Buzz" (2001) various wall-mounted phrases such as "Aha!", "Good point" and "Seems like a winner!" connect the language of corporate "creative thinking" training sessions to that of artists or art school lecturers egging on their students to work in a more inventive or ambitious way.

In the video projection "I am a Revolutionary" (2001) we see the artist repeatedly trying to credibly deploy the title phrase, acting under the guidance of a business skills training manager. Besuited in corporate costume, and with a vast, strangely framed office interior as background, Young's utterances often fall tragically flat; the manager-expert corrects her but she fails again. The implication that success in both business and art requires the convincing use of signs, irrespective of their truth content, makes this piece one of the most interesting in the show, emphasising as it does that plausible belief systems are a defining feature of both the art and corporate worlds.
What is problematic about Business as Usual, however, is that, whilst claiming to straddle the spaces of art and commerce, it cedes too much to the latter at the expense of the former. It is of course the case that business plunders art in order to reinvigorate itself, just as it is true that art is often marketed as brutally as any other commodity on display. Yet even if art's critical distance from commerce has in recent years considerably diminished, it does not follow that art and business are simply interchangeable. Business reduces everything to the ultimate goal of profit; it wants to control meaning, stipulating responses which are, in a sense, non-negotiable. In contrast, art, or some of it, disrupts mainstream ideologies, including those of business itself. Though rammed together in this exhibition, the lining up here of art and business generates neither sparks nor shock.

Reiterated throughout the show is a tiring truism, that the incorporation of the artist is, today, an inevitability we must all accept. But Young appears to have assumed a premise and then talked herself into believing it. Her works are a pastiche of corporate culture's imagery and actions, when they might well instead have parodied them.

"The socially critical dimensions of art works are those that hurt" wrote Theodor Adorno in Aesthetic Theory (1984), "those that bring to light...what is wrong with present social conditions". Young's work concerns itself with dematerialisation, but a Brechtian act of demystification would have been more to the point. The all-too-cosy closure that is commerce and art's alignment requires, more than ever, an intense and interrogative critical commentary. But Business as Usual, irrespective of its author's intentions, legitimates not critique but its voluntary absence: it may work, entertain and amuse as art, but it doesn't "hurt."

Atom Egoyan, Steenbeckett, former Museum of Mankind, London
Frieze, No. 67, May 2002

"Behind every hot new working computer is a trail of bodies", writes Stewart Brand in The Clock of the Long Now (1999): "...extinct computers, extinct storage media, extinct applications, extinct files." Atom Egoyan's Steenbeckett (2002), situated in the former Museum of Mankind in central London, addresses this issue of technological obsolescence, taking Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape (1958) as its starting point and muse. In Steenbeckett, Egoyan's own film of Beckett's play is employed as one of several links in a chain of material signifiers which have been framed and reframed in a complicated meditation on the nature of memory, technology and the preservation of the past.

Steenbeckett takes its title from a combination of the playwright's name with that of the Steenbeck editing table, a much-respected machine employed, prior to the advent of digital technology, in the preparation of processed film. Beckett's play, which Egoyan has manipulated using this device, concerns the musings and confusions of an old man as he listens to reel-to-reel tape recordings of himself speaking, thirty years before, of a highly emotional moment in his life. Sitting at a table stacked with tapes, Beckett's anonymous character scans mental and aural images of his past in an attempt to muster the energy to make, in the present moment, one more tape. Memory and recording do not, however, entirely coincide; the unreliable nature of human memory is thus emphasised, but the frailty
of the recording medium - its thin and insubstantial form - is also brought to the fore. Loading the tape is an act lovingly carried out, existentially connected to the brute physicality of the recorded voice and the actions and persona it describes.

Once inside the defunct museum visitors are directed through a door labelled "Film theatre". One passes into darkness, emerging among piles of chaotically stacked canisters, photocopied instructions for threading film, tables and shelves supporting broken tools, and a number of apparently discarded editing and recording machines. Small rubber balls, discreetly placed, recall the ball in the play, a trivial gift for a no-doubt long dead dog: "In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball" (Beckett). The empirical nature of this object, its mundane but persistent state, acts as the anchor or literal trace of a reality remaining only as memory and memory recalled. In the second space, Egoyan's now digitised film fills an entire wall, one side of a stubby corridor through which we may either hurry or pause. Although benches are provided it is difficult to sit and focus on the screen, its images huge and hard to read given the narrowness of the passage. The viewer is forced up close against the flickering pixels, a circumstance that is in sharp contrast to the situation in the third and final section of the piece. In this much larger room *Krapp's Last Tape* is again the implicit centre of attention, though this time its tragicomic plot is being spun out on a Steenbeck editor, its screen a small glowing rectangle at the far end of the set. Marking the distance between viewer and machine are a series of runners and pulleys through which the 2000 feet of film being threaded into the Steenbeck relentlessly rolls.

Exposed as it is to the air and dust of the musty museum, the sensitive film sustains ever-increasing surface alterations, which will in time result in a deeply distressed, potentially illegible print. Next door, the digital image will, in contrast, continue on its course, immune to the vagaries of temperature and dirt, a pristine but doubly distanced encoding of Beckett's earthy, recursive script.

These variously stacked, cleverly contrasted versions of Beckett's text, out of date or up to the minute containers of cryptic prose, pose, in their emphatic alignment, many questions: on the nature of memory and its mechanical reproduction, issues of trace and reference, the allegedly authentic voice and its historical transmission, and also, inevitably, the problem of the staging of *Steenbeckett* itself. Egoyan is in no small measure intrigued and deeply affected by the hands-on attributes of the fingered reel, the vivid physicality of celluloid and metal. One feels he loves this technology even as he realises it has entered its decline. But the project, expensively entertained by Artangel, is somehow overloaded, too spectacular, too intense. If this is a meditation upon how less can equal more, concision, I feel, should be the order of the day.
"To compose", writes Roland Barthes, "is to give to do". [1] Frances Kearney's complicated compositions, littered with latent revelations, with potential resolutions, operate at the level of the emphatically suggestive. In front of these works the attentive viewer becomes an intimate explicator, an active operator of meaning. Kearney's pictures, provocative, if restrained *tableaux vivants*, raise questions and puzzles pertaining to the mundane, domestic conventions of contemporary life. In staging these scenarios for our pleasure and contemplation, a direct and easy reading of the depicted situation is nevertheless withheld, kept carefully in check. Poised outside but looking into these crisply manipulated, frozen moments, the viewing subject is expected - or requested - to do a lot of work.

Kearney has cited pictures by painters such as Seurat, Friedrich, and Gerhard Richter as precedents for her depiction of people caught in poses of quiet introspection. [2] Like these artists, Kearney often shows her subjects from behind or with the faces obscured, as if to emphasise the impossibility of ever penetrating what Proust has called "the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity". [3] We feel we have stumbled uninvited into someone's private place or time. This sense of intrusion persists even when the photograph draws us into a public space - a hilltop pathway, open shore or country track. That the figure in the image is looking away from us heightens our sense of possessing a voyeuristic, if unintended, lack of tact. In *Untitled III* (1998) a young woman, poised as a sharp silhouette against a curving beach and murky sky, looks along the shore towards a point to which she may soon progress. But, since her initial place of departure is unknown to us, she may well be looking back at the place she's just left. A further ambiguity unfolds itself when we recognise that the woman's foot is caught in a spiral of sand, a detail which seems to tell us she is trapped, burdened with indecision or with a literal inability to move. This potential mark of entrapment might, however, be read as the trace of a game or a sign of blissful indifference, a mood in stark contrast to that of the distant but persistently darkening sky.

Games and play are themes frequently found throughout Kearney's photographs, whether in the form of relations between figures in an individual picture, or through showing children engaged in specific pastimes. The series *7-Year Olds still at Play* (1999) foregrounds isolated children whose involvement with the hoop or ball they are holding looks minimal at best, as though their attention is actually focused upon something which, once again, we cannot see or know. The gaze exchanged between parent and child, represented within the series *Like Mother, Like Daughter* (2000) and *Her Father's Daughter* (2001) bring to attention another type of game, the rules of which involve generational and sexual differences, conflict, but also continuity and mutual respect.

Everything in Kearney's photographs is carefully and practically researched: interiors and actors - willing amateurs, relations, friends - are sought out and staged in order that a given theme or work can be realised. Nothing is left to chance. It is perhaps this rigorous attention to detail that gives these pictures their resolute emotional focus. At the same time, as I have remarked above, a certain refusal of closure is assiduously maintained; the multiplicity of meaning inherent in any image is encouraged, not refused.

Kearney makes her work in Norfolk, in places she knew as a child and with which she has a continuing relationship today. That her pictures are assembled from initially disconnected
elements should not distract us from the fact that they are still of actual places and people, constituting in an encoded form a deeply personal compendium of experiences and effects. If the artificiality of these images is in some ways prominent - witness the flimsy shadows and super-compacted compositions - then this all the more reminds us of photography's fickle, yet vividly particular relation to the real.

Notes


Gustav Metzger: 100,000 Newspapers, T1 + 2 Artspace, London, 2003

Frieze, No.75, May 2003

A recent presentation by Gustav Metzger at London's Tate Britain took its title from a phrase by T S Eliot. A second line from The Waste Land (1922) - "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" - would have made for an apt epigram to Metzger's 100,000 Newspapers, a "public-active installation" taking up two large rooms in the basement of an abandoned brewery in London's East End. Passing through a noisy video projection by Stewart Home, one descended into a brightly-lit chamber containing thousands of newspapers strewn across an icy cold concrete floor. Visitors were requested to cut from the papers anything considered worthy of selection, an act later modified by Metzger, who mounted the individual cuttings under headings such as EXTINCTION, "WORK", and BIOTECHNOLOGY. In the second room a dusty metallic structure of shelves and walkways had been loaded with further batches of newspapers, this time in a most orderly way. Right in the centre of this underground library a well of carefully crumpled newsprint formed a pool of discarded, loose leaves, disrupting the righteous archival rigidity of the stack surrounding them. The ostensibly calm eye of the storm was itself, as it were, enraged and out of control.

The deathly coldness of this subterranean double space seemed more than appropriate after hearing Metzger remark at the Tate that reality is, today, something most people find impossible to bear. Mutilations, murders and disasters of all kinds fill the papers to an alarming degree, as do anxieties over genetic manipulation, increases in pollution, and the arrogant expansion of corporations indifferent to the havoc they too all frequently wreak. These and other nightmare narratives are brought to our attention on a daily basis, only for us to turn away from them in cowardly acts of distraction and self-deceit. Metzger's utilisation of newspapers as exemplary form, both here and in earlier exhibitions, helps to emphasise that even the official channels of information admit, more and more, that things are frighteningly close to chaos. Layers and layers of printed text, yesterday's news sinking under its own weight, might well be regarded as paralleling Walter Benjamin's influential account of historical change as an allegorical ruin. Metzger also echoes Benjamin in believing that we live, today, in a constant state of emergency and despair.
If the press reports are accurate then radical change can only come about if we refuse to remain passive consumers, incidental observers of our own potentially imminent annihilation. It is this and similar messages that have been at the centre of Metzger's practice for the last 50 years, from his literally corrosive demonstration of "Auto-Destructive Art" in London in 1961 (in which he sprayed three coloured banners with hydrochloric acid), to his provocative re-presentation in the 1990s of photographs of major 20th century historical events. Metzger's subject matter and working methods involve a provocative disruption of conventional perceptions, coupled with a refusal to sink into indifference and resignation.

What's important about the buried textual explosion that was 100,000 Newspapers isn't whether or not it succeeded according to the conventional criteria of artistic achievement or the vagaries of aesthetic taste. Rather, the piece cleverly suspended such ideas, raised them for critical consideration, whilst also problematising the related notion of the artist as a highly privileged creative individual. If we are treading on the edge of destruction, as Metzger is more than keen to stress, then it is imperative that we move ground before there is nothing left to save. This urgent need for action cannot be replaced by the making of art, which is in any case often too whimsical to act as an effective critical force. But paradoxically, in his role as artist, Metzger politicises the aesthetic domain to a point at which one begins to wonder if art could have, after all, a pivotal role to play in forcing back the rot. So apparently useless in the present circumstances, art might yet be the only "useful" means of communication we have, and vigorously independent voices like Metzger's among the few worth listening to. All those shock-horror headlines have done little to make us recognise what we surely already see, no matter how we try to look away. 100,000 Newspapers' most powerful aspect lay in its contradictions, difficulties and heightened irresolution, and in Metzger's "making strange" of what has become, in our news-saturated culture, mesmerisingly banal. It is up to others to make the implications of his work truly "public-active".

Sculpture, Vol. 22, No. 3, April 2003

Phyllida Barlow's new work is hard to classify. At first sight it was difficult to tell if the eight sculptures at Richard Salmon (all works untitled, 2002) were manipulated found-objects, constructions put together from scratch, or a laborious exercise in home decoration that had gone wildly out of control. This wide field of reference is one of the work's major strengths.

A common feature here was the sculptures' layered, painted surfaces, each individual sculpture displaying a densely-textured sheen of gloss paint, either flatly but thickly lining its exterior, or built up only to be later removed, leaving a striated but intentional plethora of allusive marks. The accumulated pourings, drips, patches and splashes were most in evidence in a piece reminiscent of a topless table or irregularly-shaped display stand whose five fragile wooden legs, tapering to a narrow point, appeared to pronounce that the whole structure was about to tiptoe across the room. This potential mobility was further enhanced by two pincer-like projections, extending as if to capture an invisible but directly detected prey. If the innumerable drips of emulsion suggested the surface of a painting, its spindly but vigorous shape hinted at enclosure or entrapment, an embrace or a rude reaching out.
In other works the focus of attention tended towards binding, rolling or tearing, in one case resulting in a small red spiral of canvas, paper and paint, a stored-away fire-hose or obscure sea-creature's compact, slimy shell. A long narrow piece hanging from floor to ceiling brought to mind Eva Hesse and Robert Morris whilst holding its own as an idiosyncratic work. Essentially an unravelling or loosening of "bandages" or bindings, this piece pointed the finger at a different but related range of procedures - the motions of covering and tying, the accumulating of elements - resulting in a complex, hybrid agglutination of materials, structures and moods.

Such hyper-complexity was further exemplified by a large sculpture in which a couple of ladder-like trestles supported a long roll of thick, soaked paper. The allusion here was to incompetent DIY, the slapstick idiocies of a Laurel and Hardy hard at work at making a mess. The roll and flow of the paper, extensive and difficult to track in its impetuous twists and turns, obscured a straggle of supporting verticals held upright by concrete and plastic containers. Both chaotic and carefully staged, this monument to domestic decoration was the largest and most geometrically convoluted sculpture in the show. Art as failed decoration was but one possible connotation of this breathtaking tumble and jumble of forms.

A similarly engaging work, this time narrow and pointed may well have once been part of the structure of a house. Lance, needle, umbrella or flagpole, at any rate of long and elegant proportions, this predominantly wooden object was both partly covered in a beautifully folded canvas cloth, and the point of origin for this material, which looked to be flowing from inside the cylinder itself. With the canvas simultaneously tucked in, pulled out, and wrapped around it wasn't clear whether we were witnessing a moment of revelation or of, conversely, hiding and protection. Ultimately both and neither of these things, it was the acute autonomy of the sculpture as a loaded but independent entity that made this such an intriguing work.

Barlow's exhibition was more than an accumulation of diverse sculptures. The discrete elements of which this display was comprised cohered to form something akin to a miniature museum of curious tools, vital devices, obscure objects abandoned in mid usage. Encountering the strangely familiar, so evident in Barlow's practice, can be a most productive provocation.


The first thing one sees upon entering Jake and Dinos Chapmans' *The Rape of Creativity* at Modern Art Oxford are six large coloured etchings, on one of which is scrawled "the accursed share". The image bearing these words shows a stylised "primitive" figure juxtaposed with a burger and fries, the text being the title of a work by Georges Bataille. Bataille's book, a theory of economics focusing upon luxury and excess rather than the more conventional theoretical bugbears of scarcity and need, is an interesting point of departure for an exhibition intimately connected with matters of economics, though hardly in ways its authors would have us believe. The reference may suggest that art is part of society's surplus yet paradoxically necessary expenditure, also placing in this category the culinary distractions provided by McDonalds and their ilk. It isn't much of a leap from this reading to
then consider art and the production of fast food as equally important components of the social whole.

Such an alignment is not, however, very convincing, and this potentially intelligent questioning soon begins to look like the proverbial flash in the pan. Another book by Bataille, the posthumous *Visions of Excess* (1985), provides, if inadvertently, a more pertinent summary of this show. "I thus allude", writes Bataille, "to a series of trifles, of mean gestures, of errors, of a sort that no one would want to linger over, for fear of falling into a refinement of sensation or into intellectual complexities that apparently lead nowhere." (p. 73) It's a pity that for all their would-be critical pitchings the Chapmans did not choose to mock their own pithy efforts by employing this remarkably apt extract from Bataille. They seem, on the other hand, keen to mock just about everyone else.

Nihilism is a tired, if commercially tried and tested mode. It appears to be the Chapmans' "philosophy". The press release refers to shock, and the challenging of assumptions but the show itself is a tediously lame display. Even *Insult to Injury* - a reworked edition of Goya's 80-odd *Disasters of War* using an original set of the Spanish artist's prints - is more of a desperate attempt at provocation than an incisive reinterpretation of this seminal Enlightenment figure. Nor does this act of *detournement* effectively destabilise humanist values, an intention which the Chapmans have cited as the driving force behind their work. The destruction of meaning, celebrated in the show's catalogue as though an indisputably noble thing, takes, throughout the exhibition, a carefully coded form. But playing at transgression is not transgression. The real reason why the Chapmans want to shock is because doing this sells work; the media wants outrage, the Chapmans provide it, and the collectors snap it up.

The adding of cartoon heads to the victims depicted in the *Disasters of War* doesn't so much update Goya's imagery as distract from it. Goya's reputation as an artist partly rests upon the trans-historical import of his work, its ability to "mean" in circumstances far removed from those of its production. It doesn't need to be updated or revised; what does require revision, though, are certain ideas about what might constitute radical or meaningful art today. Certainly the Chapmans' neo-Dadaist antics are bankrupt as a form of critique. These posh *provocateurs* would prefer to see the audience for art as the gullible mugs the brothers so smugly equate with the humanist tradition, the allegedly uncritical consumers of contemporary culture. But the humanist model is no longer dominant, the diversity of contemporary practice itself militating against art's erstwhile power to disrupt conventions whose withering away is already well advanced.

The taboos the Chapmans have chosen to break, insofar as that's what they're doing, constitute only the most obvious of targets. Vividly sexualised and deformed children, brand names with dodgy reputations, Christianity, and the reworking of other artists' seminal works - these all make for a cheap and easy game of disdain. Subtlety is a quality that is right out of the picture - no wonder they have a prime place in Saatchi's pantheon of quick-fix imagery now occupying part of what used to be London's County Hall. The usual media baiting continues at MAO with the brothers' use of *The Rape of Creativity* as the show's title, though the individual piece of that name is admittedly the largest in the exhibition. A battered caravan surrounded by various props indicating that an artist resides therein is the centrepiece of this tableau. This now immobile home is flanked by a Baselitz-like tree-trunk sculpture of a naked female figure, a sheep-headed dog carrying a detached human hand.
between its teeth, a broken white fence and, on the other side of the line, a huge fake tree. If Gavin Turk met the Hound of the Baskervilles on a windy winter night the result might look something like this. It's a rather flash allegory for a couple of artists who just can't shut up about how rebellious they are. This vignette, like much of what the Chapman brothers produce, is carefully crafted, their obsession with technical skill being perhaps one more indication of their juvenile idea of art. Posters of Salvador Dalí's exquisitely drawn zones of chaos and disarray were popular with schoolboys in the 1970s, which would be about right in terms of a potential influence on the Chapmans' practice. In their drawings too - 90 neatly-framed examples of which are on show here - there is also, and often an overly Surrealistic sense of indecision and excess. With *The Rape of Creativity* approximating a pop art version of the picturesque, and *Insult to Injury* being little but an expensive rendition of a jaded Situationist game it is hard to see what all the fuss is about. Hollywood-style marketing can ultimately be at the artist's own expense.

One of Goya's captions for the *Disasters*, together with the version rewritten by the Spanish Academy rather neatly sum up *The Rape of Creativity*: "Nothing, that's what it says"; "Nothing. Time will tell."


---


*Contemporary*, No. 51, Summer 2003

*London Orbital* concerns itself with the M25, the huge multi-lane motorway surrounding London, opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1986. "Nobody can decide how long the road is", remarks Iain Sinclair at the beginning of this equally extravagant book of over 200,000 words, "somewhere between 117 and 122 miles". "By the time you've driven it, you don't care" (p. 6). It was Sinclair's conceit to take on this immense interruption in the natural landscape, not by driving but by walking its entire length in anti-clockwise fashion, completing the circuit before the end of the millennium. There is something intriguingly perverse about committing oneself to such a task, both a refusal and an acceptance of the beast, a homing in or hunting down in order to unearth the obscured energies and memories of the erstwhile unadulterated periphery of London. Reading this artificial track as a conduit, border, mystical symbol and mind-numbing menace of epic proportions, Sinclair, together with a small squadron of "interested" friends, dedicated himself to the task at hand. The resulting book, an indulgence of detours, leaves the reader somewhat weary of the chase; by the time one's engaged with it one, to paraphrase its author, no longer cares for it.

Sinclair accurately describes the volume when he writes of "scratching at road notes, quotations from obscure books, which might one day be shaped into a viable structure," (p. 100), and of how a travelling companion hints that "I might learn to fashion shorter, crisper sentences." (p. 176). In referring to circumstances beyond the present work the ironic accuracy of such asides seems lost on Sinclair, whose bulky tome indubitably lacks the sharpness of focus, the admirable concision that a careful pruning of his prose would supply. For Sinclair does indeed pack into his text all manner of quotations, marginal characters, quirky chance encounters, snippets of quotidian occurrence. The trouble is that much of the
book is just plain dull, an overworked enigma, its author being too keen, perhaps, to please, to capture every single shred of the trek. "White is a memory colour, the colour of the dead, black's negative" (p. 161) is but one example of literally hundreds of bland, unnecessary observations, trite rather than to the point. One tires of such constant cleverness, which only detracts from the more convincing speculations scattered throughout the book.

Traipsing through "heritaged" mansions, renovated asylums, idiotic shopping arcades (for which Sinclair holds a welcome contempt), these strollers find themselves lost in the funhouse of a near-alien world order. Sinclair, the intrepid explorer of the inane, is not afraid to take the idiotic signage of Late Capitalism to task: "My feeling is that anywhere with a "servery", anywhere that is "partly open", is to be avoided." (p. 263) He's not kidding; London Orbital is an often very critical "appreciation" of the suburban environment, and rightly so. Choosing to walk is itself an act of defiance in the age of the ubiquitous automobile, though the frequent citing of J G Ballard, patron saint of the motor car, grates against Sinclair's privileging of the pedestrian, of the fearless walkers up for venturing wherever they please. As he correctly observes, "Something was wrong and walking wouldn't solve it." (p. 211). References to tortuous corporate nomenclatures, restricted pathways, punctured and decaying portions of greenery, miserable and unrecorded lives, these all supply a melancholic undercurrent to the little band's rambles around the accursed concrete loop. Sinclair is affable and alert, but the moment of engagement is, alas, all too often "promised but postponed" (p. 55). The trauma that is the M25 demands synthesis and concision, not the parallel displeasure of a literary sprawl.

**Frieze Art Fair, Zoo Art Fair, London, 2004**

*Untitled*, No. 33, Spring 2005

This year's 'Frieze Art Fair', the second to date, was accompanied by a book documenting work by 400 of the fair's several thousand participating artists, listing all the 150 galleries represented, and summarising the specially commissioned artists' projects. Nowhere in the book, however, is there any kind of straightforward definition of what exactly this or any other 'art fair' is. The closest thing to an explanation comes in the fair directors' brief introduction. 'The response to last year's fair was overwhelming', write Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover. 'We aim to build on the success of last year to keep the fair lively, a place to discover emerging artists and to get a good perspective on the most interesting new developments in contemporary art.' In these remarks the very idea of holding an art fair goes unquestioned, last year's undefined 'success' simply, as it were quite naturally, feeding into the setting up of another, this time much bigger event along the same lines.

The 2004 'Frieze Art Fair' was an immense art superstore, a huge splurge of works accompanied by a host of networking opportunities for dealers, curators, artists and other professionals keen to make their mark. 'The most interesting new developments in contemporary art' turned out to be mainly the well-established and the (hopefully) saleable, with genuinely novel work being in rather short supply. The model of art being observed by the fair was a pluralist one. 'In practical terms', observes Hal Foster in his 1985 book Recodings, 'pluralism is difficult to diagnose, yet two factors are important indices. One is an
art market confident in contemporary art as an investment ... The other index is the profusion of art schools – schools so numerous and isolate as to be unaware that they constitute a new academy.’ Pluralism, Foster continues, ‘is a situation that grants a kind of equivalence; art of many sorts is made to seem more or less equal – equally (un)important. Art becomes an area not of dialectical dialogue but of vested interests, of licensed sects.’

In the art schools, students are encouraged to enter into the marketplace as quickly as possible, and to generate their own highly distinctive brand of work in what is a commercial rather than critical approach to making art. Thus, as Foster implies, the false differences between artistic styles feeds directly into the market, and this is why he calls the art schools academies. The ‘Frieze Art Fair’ was predictably dominated, its vast scale notwithstanding, by a depressing sameness throughout, with little that pointed to a different order of conception or distribution. Although pretending to diversity the pluralist approach is in fact a rather narrow catch-all of aesthetic conceits, reeking, like the market itself, of the acceptable and the popular and the easy to consume.

Gustav Metzger has referred to a condition he terms ‘information overload’ and the ‘Frieze’ fair was certainly an example of this. There was too much to see, not enough time to see it in, and far too many people around for one to get easily about the specially constructed super-tent in which the fair was housed. During the same weekend as the fair, on a panel discussion held as part of ‘PILOT: 1’ (an alternative presentation of contemporary art located in London's East End and a good foil against which to see ‘Frieze’ and ‘Zoo’), Bob and Roberta Smith suggested that the ‘Frieze’ fair was really just a way of hoovering up the loose change of the super-rich. He was certainly correct.

The ‘Zoo Art Fair’, held within the confines of London Zoo, showcased only 26 galleries, mostly British, all of which had started up within the last three years. The unusual location promised much but, alas, gave little. On the opening night the unfriendly and inefficient security staff bullied the audience into leaving well before the prospective closing time and kept many people, including some of the artists involved in the fair, waiting outside in the pouring rain. Showing a smaller smattering of galleries than the ‘Frieze’ fair was not necessarily a bad thing, but once again the works on display left much to be desired. Great opportunities were missed: the man in the gorilla suit, Angus Fairhurst, exhibited in the ‘Frieze’ but not the ‘Zoo’ event and no one thought to put in for comparison some natty historical references such as a work or two by the Fauves, that is, the ‘wild beasts’. For all the fuss about the newness of the galleries involved, the ‘outsiders’, such as they were, looked rather tame – but then the implicit analogy (the gallery or art fair as a zoo) was to the point: art fairs are spectacles of tameness, a deliberately palatable collaboration between all concerned.

Although, as one wandered about these two ‘extravaganzas of blandness’ (to borrow a phrase from Art & Language), one saw, occasionally, an interesting work, this seems of little consequence. Amongst thousands of works it's easy to spot a couple of things of note. I liked Amikam Toren's quirky assemblages in the ‘Frieze’ fair, and a small wall-mounted piece by Phyllida Barlow at ‘Zoo’ but the video by Lela Budde in ‘PILOT: 1’ was as striking as anything in the two main presentations of that overindulgent weekend. My personal tastes aside, what visiting the ‘Frieze’ and ‘Zoo’ art fairs revealed is that a work's quality or interest is not determined by its commercial context, though its price and general visibility clearly are.
The notion of the ‘emerging’ artist, used in the ‘Frieze’ book but also, unfortunately, in the publicity material for ‘PILOT: 1’ implies a barrier through which artists need to break before ‘success’ kicks in. Employing such terms only reinforces the hierarchical funnel that is the commercial art world, in which a small number of artists become superstars whilst others are regarded as having not yet ‘made it’. This is a rather dumb way to think about art. Art fairs reduce art to decoration and investment, ultimately to the point at which it may as well not be ‘art’ at all.

Frieze, No. 93, September 2005

Located in a vast upper room within a disused postal sorting office in central London, Kutlug Ataman's Kuba consists of 40 television sets, each carrying a recorded interview with an inhabitant of the shanty town of that name, a tiny residential area south of Istanbul. The TVs, placed upon a variety of small rough tables, are old domestic sets and each is accompanied by a similarly dilapidated chair, sometimes an electric fire too. The first indication one encounters of the actual work is the babble of voices from the TVs. Subtitles provide the viewer with an English translation (from Turkish) of the speakers' words, which are thus most easily grasped by sitting directly across from the screens. To reach the piece one has to walk through what is effectively an extension of it, the sorting office, passing static conveyor belts, smashed windows, abandoned offices and graffiti-stained walls. Through the ceiling above one's head one can hear the massed TVs some minutes before one discovers that these are the source of the noise.

Once in the main room, randomly moving from screen to screen, one picks up the patched together stories of 40 distinct but interrelated lives, with each of the zone's inhabitants conveying, in a direct and apparently authentic manner, their memories, hopes and fears as these relate to their arrival in, and life within Kuba itself.

The people of Kuba are an isolated, disenfranchised group, a fact reflected in the way that Ataman has placed the island of TVs, chairs and fires in the centre of an immense space. The visitor to Kuba is in effect transported to a tiny, depressing world of poor, unhappy people whose confessions reveal a plethora of miserable memories but also, if only occasionally, pockets of optimism too. Ataman appears to be giving his subjects the freedom to "be themselves" on camera, to talk frankly and with emotion about life in the colony that is their home. Yet his frequent editing is clearly apparent and the actual voices of the interviewees are for the most part lost in the melee.

A disused sorting office is an apt location for this work. These 40 interviews are like 40 private letters, opened and archived, 40 smuggled-out stories delineating the vicissitudes of life within the void or lacuna that is Kuba. Ataman has carried out an exercise in urban anthropology, simultaneously composing a fantastic example of Andy Warhol's claim that in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes. But employing a disused building of this kind is a sign, ultimately, not of communication but of a scrambled signal, of frustrated confessions or indecipherable codes. Kuba is at one and the same time both intimate and alienating. The constant requirement that the viewer read the translation of each speakers'
words means one's engagement with the visual features of the work is repeatedly broken. Although this disjunction is a normal component of watching programmes recorded in a foreign language, with Kuba the separation is emphatically poignant. One comes away from the work with mere snatches of the speakers' expostulations still intact: "She tells me to bring the cloth. I bring the cloth", reports one little girl. "I was dodging left and right" announces a middle-aged man. The broader themes are predominantly negative - acts of violence recorded and regretted, lazy or irresponsible husbands, acute poverty, illiteracy and the inability to gain an education. One old man tells how the house he built, literally with his own hands and from the mud and stones he found on the site, was torn down by arrogant, insensitive officials. So he began to build again, a prisoner of his own persistence and need. Such moments of resilience are, however, all too rare. It's not that energy or heroism are absent from the ghetto that is Kuba; rather, the negative outweighs, time and time again, the positive within these stories and the lives that they convey.

The last scene of Francois Truffaut's Fahrenheit 451 shows a gathering of rebels, escapees from a society in which books and reading have been banned. The outsiders are pacing up and down in the open air, memorising the texts of books that may soon be destroyed. Kuba recalled for me this image, a panoply of solitary voices united in common purpose against the reigning ideology, Ataman's Kuba is a spectacular act of preservation and transmission of intimate thoughts, a record of the holding together of desperate, threatened lives.


_Art Monthly_, No. 319, September 2008

Susan Hiller’s “The Last Silent Movie” (2007) is a two-part work comprised of a 22-minute video and a series of 24 related etchings. In a pitch black screening room one listens to a sequence of 25 voices, all of which have been unearthed from a number of sound archives, and reactivated, so to speak – literally so in the present case – by Hiller, who has pointed out on a number of occasions that when we hear a human voice, even if it is a recording, we are being touched by an actual emanation from the speaker’s body. In the matter of recorded sound we are perhaps then dealing with a kind of revenant or ghost, with the potentially infinite repetition of an utterance that is nonetheless an emanation from an individual located in a particular place and time. The voices Hiller employs speak in what are now extinct or seriously endangered languages, a factor which makes them more than just the trace of a specific individual but, rather, the cipher or remnant of a whole culture or way of life.

The range of languages utilised is broad and intriguing. They include K’ora from South Africa, recorded in 1938 by its last speaker; Manx from the Isle of Man, captured in 1948 and now extinct; and Blackfoot from Canada and America, recorded in the 1990s and today seriously endangered. As these and other voices are released into the room a plain white text at the top of the blackened screen provides basic information – what the language is, where it was used, when and by whom it was recorded, and, if known, the speaker’s name. A text lower down the screen provides a translation into English of the voice’s utterances, some of which were taped by anthropologists who had briefed the speakers on what to say, others being culturally-specific folktales or songs. The viewer/listener is, through this
simultaneous presentation of the source material and its textual translation, placed in a curious position. Should one close one’s eyes, literally and metaphorically, to the textual translation, giving oneself up to the pitch, crackle and grain of the voice, irrespective of one’s inability to understand what is being said, or instead assiduously attend to the meaning of what one is hearing, focusing upon the words on the screen? Such a dislocation may appear to be a merely irritating contradiction, a problem too mundane to worry about, but the disjunction draws attention to important issues examined by twentieth-century linguists and critical theorists, for example the difference between writing and speech (Jacques Derrida), and the materiality of the human voice (Julia Kristeva). A second level of complexity is that of the relationship between image and text. Notwithstanding its title, this work is not a silent film, nor is it, from a certain perspective, a film or video at all, in that there is no pictorial element save the text. Here, then, the text is cleverly redefined as an image, reminding one of that curious, contradictory genre the “text painting”. The medium of radio also comes to mind as a point of comparison, with the listener inventing the images that materialise as one hears the sounds emitted by the (human and electronic) speakers.

Outside the screening room in a narrow hallway are the etchings, each a single, staggered line, the product of Hiller having fed select phrases into an oscilloscope. They are thus further translations of the borrowed voices, visual images of sonic vibrations, another twist within the already sinuous reinscriptions that “The Last Silent Movie” echoes and exemplifies.

Such repeated repositioning has important implications. A strain of constant deferment runs throughout the work, so that nothing is ever quite what it initially appears to be. The translating into English of obscure and lost languages suggests the infuriating existence of something like a master-language, an imperialism of English that wryly subsumes that which its very dissemination throughout the world has helped to eradicate: the erstwhile diversity of cultures with which these individual languages are inextricably linked. Trained as an anthropologist, Hiller is keen to protect cultural diversity; she does not pretend to speak for the lost worlds these voices represent. But even if it must be as melancholy fragments that these compressed packets of lost time enter into a second life, Hiller has managed to assemble them in a convincingly integrated way. Supposed certainties are always open to revision when the past is allowed to enter the present on, as far as is possible, its own terms.


*Art Monthly*, No. 334, March 2010

What exactly Gregor Muir hoped to achieve by writing this thoroughly pernicious chronicle of the rise and demise of young British art is hard to to ascertain. Whilst on one level *Lucky Kunst* is a highly personal account of Muir’s close affiliation with the artists, dealers and collectors we now regard as constituting the yBa, on another it purports to be an impersonal history. The narrative – it’s practically a fairy story – is set in London in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The yBa were, Muir explains, “the bad boys and girls of British art”. Swaggering provocateurs...flaunting their talent in front of high-powered collectors...relentlessly promoting themselves”. But these two awkwardly intertwined approaches remain, in the end,
irreconcilable. Is this a subjective account of what Muir terms, in his somewhat conformist prose, “the scene” and “fresh talent”, or does it manage to be a substantial critical examination? Was the moment of the yBa an attack on dowdy conventions or, conversely, a highly cynical, self-promoting enterprise right from the start? Muir fails to consider these important questions, frittering away much of the book in pointless detail and inane – if often unintentionally amusing – judgemental generalisations.

In paranoid fashion Muir repeatedly emphasises his own contribution to the yBa phenomenon. He is endlessly on the lookout for, once they begin to exhibit abroad, “another excuse...to hop on a plane and be at the centre of the action”. He insists (having spent much of the period at private views and parties with Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and the Chapmans) that he was “unbelievably close to everything...observers may have seen me as something of an important player in and promoter of YBA.” The cri de coeur continues: “This view would be supported by the countless interviews that I gave to the press...as well as the number of occasions I was cited by significant individuals as playing an important role”.

Chapter after chapter is spattered with linguistic vulgarieties, as though a “street level” writing style is somehow more convincing than subtlety or self-reflection. In fact this sloppy writing only reveals just how brainwashed by pop culture Muir and his Thatcher generation compatriots really were. The romantic clichés come thick and fast: the grim poverty suffered by these young outsiders, their rebellious spirit, their camaraderie and unified stance against a world too insensitive to grasp their vision of art. Muir never seems to realise that unsubstantiate anecdotes about the copious consumption of alcohol carry little critical weight. These artists don’t work, they “struggle”, they are invariably “cool” – a vacuous designation if ever there was one – and it’s clear from the beginning that nothing is going to stop these go-getters from finding the success they know they deserve.

Muir’s sense of achievement, like that of the yBa itself, is completely tied to marketing and economic gain; no different, then, to that of those institutions against which they supposedly rebelled. This parity of interests militates against the idea that the yBa were genuinely disruptive of Capitalist culture. Rather, they clearly, like their present apologist, swallowed the bait. The motor for the yBa’s success, Muir tells us, was shock and sensationalism, connecting this “aesthetic” with the type of imagery favoured by advertising director Charles Saatchi. “Saatchi was a visionary”, Muir notes, someone who “showed London how to present contemporary art in the best possible surroundings.” Having discussed how influential Saatchi’s late ‘80s exhibitions of Jeff Koons and other New York artists was upon Hirst and his set, Muir erroneously credits Saatchi not only with practically inventing the model of the “white cube” gallery but also a whole visual “ethics” of shock. There isn’t a Dadaist in sight.

The elliptical nature of Muir’s hagiographic reading of the yBa becomes increasingly apparent; yet he never grasps the most obvious contradiction in their anti-establishment itinerary, which is that these artists wilfully wallowed in the stereotype of the artist-rebel who eventually joins the club. The yBa failed, furthermore, to perceive that there is something rather pathetic and conciliatory about regarding mass culture as a positive take-off point for one’s own visual work. Rather than interrogating hegemonic cultural forms the yBa merely reproduced them. When Muir contemplates individual yBa “masterpieces” he supplies, in place of argument, numerous trite asides. His claims are just daft. Hirst’s shark, for example, “might be said to be the contemporary equivalent of the Mona Lisa...it also confirms the importance of a single telephone call.” The passage on Sarah Lucas’ toilets is outstanding in its blank stupidity: “For her 1996 solo exhibition... Lucas presented a fully operational toilet...Impressed, I asked if the work might...go on show...as part of the exhibition I was working on at the ICA.” But why was Muir “impressed”? From such passive acceptance of the stylised rubbish many of his peers produced Muir attempts to generate a whole philosophy: “any object rescued from the detritus of everyday life”, he claims, “could
legitimately be launched into the upper stratosphere of profundity”. This is surely, and
demonstrably, untrue.

Muir correctly decodes the Turner Prize as something that “soon became a vehicle that
would help validate a younger generation who [sic] simply refused to stand in line and wait
their turn”. He for once delivers an accurate picture of what the yBa was about: a self-
seeking complicity and a deep desire for commercial success at any price, a craving, that is,
for institutional validation. This was a new kind of academic art, proffered by artists whose
work simply affirmed received ideologies. Who produces mass culture, so beloved of the
yBa, if not the establishment? Muir’s TV generation rituals of submissive consumption
masquerade as volition, but as a serious challenge to high culture the yBa’s indelibly
pedestrian escapades just won’t wash.

Towards the end of Lucky Kunst there’s a passing reference to the “young hotshot writer”
Simon Ford, whose essay “The Myth of the Young British Artist” (1998), Muir predictably
neglects to cite. Mapping out the hype and establishment connections behind the promotion
of the yBa, Ford, in just a few pages, tells us more of importance about their rise and
ratification than Muir manages in 85,000 words. There are no credible accounts of the critical
value of work produced by the yBa because most of it is merely rehashed pop art or limp
conceptualism. There’s nothing of substance about it to defend, as Muir’s book
unintentionally makes plain.

Art & Language, Portraits and a Dream, Lisson Gallery, London, 2010
Art Monthly, No. 334, March 2010

The unnamed writer of the press release for this display of recent works by Art & Language
emphasises that they are “among the very last works [by A&L] that [Charles] Harrison saw
and commented on”. Harrison, a collaborator with the group since 1970, died in August
2009. Although the actual making of A&L’s studio work was carried out by Michael Baldwin
and Mel Ramsden, Harrison’s contribution as a theorist and recorder of the now extensive
history of this recursive, sometimes controversial practice is of some significance. He is
quoted several times in the text, to the point where one might regard this exhibiti
on as
a

homage to his labours and support. And indeed it is difficult to think of another contemporary
practice which has enjoyed the benefits of having an in-house, full-blown art historian as part
and parcel of its ongoing operation.

What is particularly pointed about this is that A&L’s long-standing dispute with the
established canon of Modernist art has involved not only a critique of the visual practices
associated with that term, but also of the institutional discourses upon which this canon
rests, and through which it continues to exist within the museum today. Whilst the members
of A&L have, since the group’s inception in 1968, produced a complex weave of texts and
publications written, as it were, in their own hand, Harrison’s presence as the Guillaume
Apollinaire of Conceptual Art has surely done much to contribute to A&L’s own entry into the
convoluted hierarchy of potentially disaffirmative artistic practices. The paradox here
remains, I fear, unresolved.

Several of the pieces in the current exhibition are an extension of work first shown by A&L in
the late 1990s. A number of “Minimalist” chairs have been assembled from uniformly-sized,
painted canvases, many bearing snazzy graphic patterns or mutated extracts from A&L’s
own extensive history. Placed adjacent to the gallery walls some of the chairs either face
towards, or with their backs to framed images and texts, obscuring but also drawing attention
to them. The reader-viewer is frustrated in their reading-looking; just as they cannot sit upon
this rigid yet essentially unstable seating, their critical engagement with the overtly visual or
textual material in the show is held in check. Harrison, in his Conceptual Art and Painting, 2001, places considerable critical weight upon works by A&L of this type, in which the aesthetic or textual components of a given piece are rendered so as to place much of the material out of reach. Such hybrid objects – part text, part painting, part sculpture or readymade – hover, according to Harrison, midway between legibility and decoration. In discussing A&L’s Sighs Trapped by Liars, 1997, a work consisting of 436 small canvases, he notes that “A spectator...could easily read the text on the nearest row of panels. The next row was harder to read...and so on. As the individual texts shaded into illegibility, so the spectator was invited to surrender to the decorative properties of the whole.”

This passage is more than a little apposite when considering Portraits and a Dream, 2009, which fills the front ground floor gallery of the Lisson. Here a wall-mounted printed text consisting of ninety pages arranged in a grid is accompanied by rows of paper-chains suspended from the ceiling, these having been made from a second copy of the wall-based text. Much of the latter can be read directly: “What chance is there for us in these conditions critically to address some questions to the prevailing culture of art?” runs one line, but a great deal of it is impossible to decipher. In the paper-chain version the text is scrambled into decoration, the loops of prose implying prison shackles as much as the annual office party. What might be described as the level of decorativeness is notched up a rank here, as if to suggest the impossibility of ever grasping artistic meaning in its entirety. Alternatively, this consciously contrived instability between image and text may itself be a mode of anti-institutional address. This kind of ostensibly productive awkwardness is in fact directly defended in Conceptual Art and Painting, yet one wonders just how much critical mileage might be gained by such an acceptance of the all-too-respectable realm of the decorative. For one may further read such works as signs of critical emasculation, the potentially interrogative force of art having been reworked by the culture industry, as opposed to by A&L itself, into a form too easily manageable and contained. Intentional ambivalence is not necessarily an effective critical force.

Notes on “Artist-Led”
Christopher Rawcliffe (Ed.), Beyond the ambit, published to accompany the exhibition of that title held at Project/Number, London, in 2011.

1. These remarks are deliberately couched in both positive and negative terms with respect to the artist-led or artist-run space.

2. Re Gustave Courbet: “In 1855 and 1867, on the occasion of International Exhibitions in Paris, he held large private exhibitions of his works in an attempt to offset official neglect. Both attracted more unfavourable than helpful notice, but they established the precedent of privately organized exhibitions, also followed by Manet and the Impressionists.” Peter and Linda Murray, A Dictionary of Art and Artists, Penguin, 1975, p. 104.

3. Artists may organise their own spaces or exhibitions so as to show, in the first instance, their own work. This may be because no one else is interested in showing it. Or because the artist wants to control the environment in which the work is seen, and doesn’t trust an established gallery to do this. They may just not trust established galleries full stop.

4. Artist-run spaces can do things that conventional galleries can’t or won’t carry out. They may offer “alternative” positions and possibilities to already extant venues; on the other hand, such new spaces might be set up with a view to becoming established and successful as soon as possible, using the “artist-led” label as a means of signifying authenticity, a
supposedly positive mark that may in fact be mere dissembling, something designed to draw
audiences, collectors and critics to them like moths to the proverbial flame. Such a stance
relies on the too-often unquestioned belief in the ideology of the artist as a special person:
“spiritual”, dedicated, honest and committed to art and only art.

5. Spaces managed by artists often cannot provide or achieve what established galleries
(should) supply as a matter of course: contact with critics, magazines, collectors, audiences,
financial support; technical and legal advice, this, that and the other if and when the gallery
is serious and its directors and agents mean what they say.

6. “With literally thousands of…artists keen to make their mark and only a relatively small
group of commercial galleries through which they might do this, it is no surprise that artist-led
spaced have massively increased in number over the last few years. Since many artists are
anything but wealthy, the do-it-yourself approach has become a normal modus operandi
within the gallery world. Artist-led spaces are often much more quirky structures than those
run by established dealers, and artists exhibiting within them adapt what they are doing to
the venue rather than treat it as an unconvincing white cube. The separation between artist
and gallerist is also brought into question in artist-run ventures, since the artist often finds
that if he or she doesn’t turn their hand to promoting and selling their work, no one else will
do it for them.” Peter Suchin, “Energy and Overspill”, included in AN Collections: Shifting
practice, distributed with AN magazine, July 2005.

7. Artist-run spaces show that artists can be organised, resourceful, optimistic and
enthusiastic, that they can cope very well, and even thrive within the parameters laid down
by conventional social mores, perhaps even expanding these for the common good. They
may even change the rules of the game. (Conversely, then, they may be on occasion little
more than avant garde businesses. The expanded definition of art brought about by
Conceptualism in the 1960s and ’70s was matched by a parallel expansion of the gallery
system, both in terms of what an individual gallery was or did, and with the introduction of
what we now call the “freelance curator”).

8. An artist whose name I will withhold had, several years ago, a discussion with a long-
established West-End gallery (ditto) about the possibility of being represented by them. The
director said to the artist something very like: “We won’t tell you what work you should make
or how to go about doing this; but, in turn, you don’t tell us how or when we
sell it, or to
whom”. The artist, incidentally, was not taken on.

9. If you haven’t got any friends, supporters, contacts or charisma start an exhibition space
and watch your popularity rise as the artists line up to ask for a show.

10. “The idea “artist-run space” is suggestive; but without some kind of discrimination it is
entirely meaningless.” David Batchelor, “Imagine this…”, included in Life/Live, Musee d’Art
Section 4: Other
Merz Lexicon
Peter Suchin
The following is extracted from a potentially substantial dictionary of terms, many of which refer directly (but not exclusively) to Kurt Schwitters.

---

Apparition
"These are haunted pinnacles, where dwell the ghosts of things that never were." (Christopher Short)

Audience
Nobody knows who they are.

Black Box
1. The name “black box” is given to the device within an aircraft that keeps track of cockpit conversations, instrument readings and the general running of the plane. In 1985 Alexander Dallin published Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers, a detailed analysis of the downing of an American civil aircraft by Russian military planes after the former had strayed into Soviet airspace on the 31st of August, 1983. The black box, also known as the flight recorder, was never found. A complex mesh of theories about the incident soon materialised. Did the US government deliberately let the ‘plane go off course? Flight KAL 007, as the aircraft was officially known, was being shadowed by a US military ‘plane packed with tracking equipment, strongly suggesting that the deviation was no mere accident of navigational drift.

2. John Dee (1527–1608/9), Elizabeth I’s astrologer, was one of the world’s first professional spies. His code number, like that of Ian Fleming’s James Bond, was “007”. Dee was the inventor of numerous black boxes of a different sort, including a large clockwork beetle, a creature whose existence led to Dee being accused of Black Magic (punishable at the time by death). Fortunately, Dee successfully defended himself.

3. Allen S Weiss describes the labyrinth, following Pierre Rosenstiehl, as “a sort of black-box which generates numerous metaphors”.

4. The set of “over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas” entitled Oblique Strategies, a pack of oracle cards by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt for use by artists stuck in a rut from which they would like to escape, come in a neat black box. "Infinitesimal gradations” reads one, “Emphasize the flaws” reads another, “Abandon normal instruments” a third.

5. Schwitters’ tombstone in the churchyard at Ambleside in the north of England is itself a small black box, a distended rectangle of worn slate bearing only the designation:

KURT SCHWITTERS
1887–1948
CREATOR OF MERZ

Destination
Proust, quoted by Benjamin: “...I believe there exists for every beautiful sentence an unprecio

sirable right which renders it inalienable to all takers except the one for whom it waits, according to a destination which is its destiny.”

For Schwitters, fleeing from the Nazis as they expanded their grip on Europe, the issue was one of moving away from the terror, and not necessarily towards a particular destination or intended end-point. This lonely action of an endless exiling was the fate of many thousands of people at this time. Implicit in Schwitters work is the deep sadness of forced departure, the leaving behind of everything one loves.

Encryption
“All the best things come in code. You have to work for meaning.” (Lindsay Clarke)

Inkblot
Among the most intriguing inkblots are those elaborate entities produced by Victor Hugo. The blot is just the beginning, of course. The transformation of the stain into a name (that of Hugo himself) is a much-laboured reworking of an accidental effect.

Longing
“She’s the one I’d like to wake up with one day and start everything afresh.” (Jacques Derrida)

Porridge
There can be, as Lindsay Clarke observes, “a porridge of images”. Schwitters used porridge as an emergency material when interned as an
Enemy Alien on the Isle of Man (UK) during the last few months of World War II. In Britain, "doing porridge" is slang for spending time in jail.

Post Card
1. Where to begin with the post card? The object itself, as Derrida insists, is ambivalent, frail yet firm, public yet private, the picture and the text forever engaged in a kind of game in which each perpetually outstamps the other. Turn it this way or that, the hierarchy of relations between image and text remain unresolved.

2. In the 1890s the philatelist Joseph Palmer covered the walls of an entire room of his London premises with stamp forgeries, calling it his "Chamber of Philatelic Horrors".

3. At the end of the Second World War Schwitters, many of whose works were on the scale and of the delicacy of postage stamps, sold his stamp collection in order to finance a holiday in the Lake District with his companion Edith Thomas. Rather than return to London they decided to remain in Ambleside. It was in a nearby barn that Schwitters began his third and final Merzbau.

Secret Chamber
1. Schwitters' Merzbau have affinities with secret chambers. Writing of the destruction of the latter, Allan Fua suggests that "Unaccounted-for spaces, when detected, are readily utilised. Passages are boldly run through the heart of many a secret device, with little veneration for the mechanical ingenuity that has been displayed in their construction. The builder of to-day, as a rule, knows nothing of and cares less for such things, and so they are swept away without a thought." "Swept away without a thought" - this would appear to perfectly echo the disappearance of the Hanover and Lysaker Merzbau.

2. Christopher Short's novel The Black Room revolves around a Prussian archduke's construction of a curious ghostly chamber. We are once again in the ambient orbit of Schwitters: "Softly the panel slides back. A portion of the darkness it reveals detaches itself and enters the room." In Schwitters, interior and exterior interpenetrate, what is contained is the container itself.

3. As well as being a secret, idiosyncratic space, the Merzbau was arguably also a sort of study, archive or miniature museum. According to Dora Thornton, the Renaissance study was "perceived by contemporaries as having... a secret identity of its own, which might persist long after its owner's death", "The way in which studies were actually constructed clarifies the special significance and distinct character which those rooms held for their owners."

4. The overlaying of distinct spaces is also a pertinent issue. "Like those Japanese boxes that fit one inside the other", writes Joris-Karl Huysmans in his Against Nature (1884), "this room had been inserted into a larger one, which was the real dining-room planned by the architect".

Silence
In Heinrich Boll's story "Murke's Collected Silences" a radio interviewer retains the fragments of recording tape containing his interviewees' awkward pauses and listens to their idiosyncratic qualities in private or in the company of a prostitute.

Time Capsule
The Merzbau, had they been preserved, would have been archives or time capsules, like the Soane Museum in London, The Amber Room in St Petersburg, or the multidimensional time machine The Tardis in the UK television series "Dr Who".

Titanic
Gavin Bryars' The Sinking of the Titanic (1969) is a collage of sonic incidents connected with the disaster that befell this immense ship on April 15, 1912. The sound of the iceberg scraping the hull, the tinkling of a music box heard in one of the lifeboats, and the various hymns and popular tunes performed by the ship's band as the boat sank - these and other elements comprise Bryars' haunting work. At least three distinct recordings of the piece exist, its open nature being a kind of sounding out of musical and social possibilities.

Umbrella
Keep one about a person at all times.
**Ursonate**

The voice of Schwitters persists through this tightly-structured sound poem, composed in the 1920s. Brian Eno used an extract from it in 1977. "Today," noted Schwitters' son Ernst in 1992, "I collected the tape of the Ursonate at the post office. And indeed, it is an original recording — probably the only one — by my father himself ...." This recording was simultaneously present and absent — Eno had found it, Ernst received it only in 1992, over 40 years after Schwitters' death.

**W**

W is the title of a melancholy memoir by Georges Perec. It is also the title and complete text of a poem by Schwitters, an inverted M for Merz.

**References**


Lindsay Clarke, *The Chymical Wedding*, Picador, 1980 (pp. 190, 217).


Ernst Schwitters, quoted from the booklet accompanying the CD of Kurt Schwitters' Ursonate, Wergo, 1983.

Christopher Short, *The Black Room*, Four Square, 1964 (pp. 13, 163).

Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study*, Yale University Press, 1997 (pp. 1, 39).


Recurrent Loop
Poster text to accompany Chris Tosic’s contribution to 4 x 4, curated by Harry Pye, Sartorial, London, 2008, concurrently published in The Rebel, Summer 2008

Signs taken as blunders. This illusion negates collusion. Blank are the wonders. A text in profusion. Stop now, stop, go. Chance of an intermission. Regard these staged constraints. There’s room, of course. A curse of complaints. A place of death. This reception, without transmission. The page torn out. The picture burnt black. Four words going forwards. An absence, a lack. The museum: *ad nauseum*.


Do the words count? Everything counts, everything’s considered. The monochrome culls colour. We proceed to dither. The force is folded. The horse is halted. The text is taken. The words have bolted. Were you suffering, like? It’s probably very simple. Straighter than you think. No need for experts. Don’t call the Oulipo. Don’t ring the linguists. Don’t unpack your Proust. The last four words.


Are the words under? Are the words over? Phillips, Smith, Holzer, Johns? A perfectly potted Ph.D. Not content with style. Pynchon on another mission. We were suffering like. Silent and morose oxymoron. Cult of the quiet. Chatter slashed to bits. Night against the day. Days dark as nights. Pictures looking for words. Four ways to begin. Four ways to e
Notes from the Black Box

1. “To relate, to teach, even to describe is all right... enough for each one to exchange human thought, by taking or putting a coin silently in someone’s hand... the universal reportage of which, with the exception of literature, everything among the different kinds of contemporary writing partakes.” This remark from Mallarme would appear to be in radical disagreement with another, somewhat more aphoristic utterance by that same poet: “Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book.” On the one hand, Mallarme locates and isolates what he terms “literature”, lifts it high above the mundane terrain of a merely utilitarian written or spoken exchange. The metaphorical coin is fixed, stable, retaining in all circumstances its static but evidently uninspired value. On the other, everything is potentially grist to Mallarme’s mill. There is nothing, that is, that cannot be alchemically transformed, sensitively rendered supremely other.

2. “...but because, no longer knowing how to write ‘love-letters’, they will never read you.” So Jacques Derrida writes, so Derrida marks his cards, his cryptic, double-bluffing double-touc picture postcards, the lost last love letters in history. “The password’s ‘Denmark’,” he said, “it will allow you to enter into the mystery of the mansion, the House of the Seven Gables.” And so I laboured by the singing light, another Doubting Thomas destined for that curious dialectic of progressive transmission and degression or delay. As Roland Barthes succinctly observes: “To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not – this is the beginning of writing.”

3. “What newspapers do not report, simply does not exist.” So remarked, no doubt with irony, the mysterious B Traven. Traven acted out what Barthes would later term “the Death of the Author” many years before that expression became a commonplace of literary debate. Repeatedly deploying false names and inaccurate biographical details, Traven constantly destroyed his own past, his very sense of a historically coherent self. But the maxim is ultimately untrue, and what is in the papers is, of course, only what’s placed there by the powers that be. Traven was the champion of the poor and the dispossessed, the anarchist advocate of all that was marginalised, trivialised, trampled over. An important precedent for both Barthes and Traven is Mallarme’s recognition that “The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, who hands over to the words...”. And let’s not forget Ducasse.

4. In his decidedly unpoetic Poems Ducasse writes: “I shall leave no memoirs.” It is truistic to observe that this radical young man of only twenty four years of age at his death left only the minimum of biographical details, as though echoing Barthes’ desire for a form of biography consisting of “biographies” whose distinction and mobility might... come to touch...some future body, destined to the same dispersion, attention being directed towards only “a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections”. Jeremy Reed, in his novel based upon a sustained act of conjecture as to the intimate particularities of Ducasse’s life puts the following thoughts into his hero’s head at a point towards the time when his life will be at an end, “I am systematically destroying everything that is not vitally necessary to my existence. Letters, books, clothes, journals...and all of the correspondence”.

5. It can’t be an accident, as I’m sure someone has already observed, that the cinema was invented around the same time Freud wrote of screens, projections, repressions, the flat plane of pleasure and
discontent, the always-already coded connecting thread between one and another, misery board and soapbox surface, the boundary of the clandestine self, the paradoxically garrulous void. It took longer than we expected to walk beneath the water, making the journey, oddly enough, soon after a friend had mentioned Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, wherein, I know, the narrator explores the seabed whilst safely sealed in a suit of seashells or some such incredible garb. The tunnel plunged beneath the Thames, an immense curving track packed with traffic, our elusive destination the pretty park with the body behind the bush in Blow Up, another chain of screens. I have forgotten my umbrella.

6. Her eventual arrival may determine a secret integration, a long-awaited much delayed, no doubt fertile but feared concatenation of elements, the figure in question being half revenant, half legacy, at any rate a sort of destination, "like the words of a book that awaits the reader who, by blowing at the dust and opening the cover, will revive the author." And I can tell you, that's Isma herself, watching the waves fail, the sirens of the hour, the implicitly erotic point of production of a necessary inflection. But I'm a slow learner, a fast burner, a black burner, a poor earner, and one never really knows how these intimate collisions will turn out. It would be the easiest thing to avoid the confrontation altogether, remain here in this room where — with a lot of detours, returns, erasures, scratches and various digressions — I am presently writing.

7. On my black table at the present moment: a notebook, a dictionary of art, a diary detailing appointments, a pen, a small spanner, a map of the London Underground, two novels by Alan Robbe-Grillet, a journal kept between Saturday, 6th of August, 2005 and the Tuesday, 16th of November 2007 — the first of its 240 plus pages are neatly inscribed but it the quality of the handwriting soon diminishes, dwindles into scribble. There's also a pile of papers, another novel, this one by Chris Petit (a gift from Michael H), a broken lens from a magnifying glass, Derrida's The Post Card, a bright yellow notepad that's become almost too precious to write upon, the latest copy of Mute, its back a mix of orange and black. AR-G's In the Labyrinth opens with the words "This story is fiction, not a report." That's the truth.

8. The other text has two beginnings, one rapidly following upon the other. Though seemingly set in Hong Kong the reader is told that "Any resemblance, in setting or situation, between the two is a matter of pure coincidence, whether objective or otherwise." By "the two" is meant the place the book describes and that actual territory designated, in the world outside the book, as "Hong Kong". The second introduction points out, however, that if the reader regards the book he is about to read as a merely fictitious depiction of Hong Kong, then "the author... would advise him to go back and look again". The House of Assignation is thus a machine through which the reader is frustrated — or given a certain freedom — from the start, just as in Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds three distinct openings — four in fact — are presented. A pure report: never.

9. And so it is that "reportage" is nothing less than a form of literary comportment, a portly compartment upon the exterior of which is affixed a prominent script firmly insisting "This is real!" The suitcases is stuffed to the gills, the portmanteau is bursting at the seams with a rampant plausibility, or so we are led to believe. Yet nothing which is true is false; nothing which is false is true. An excess of nothing doesn't make something, that's for sure. The best thing would be to write down everything that happens from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand. Yet in the end such persistence merely generates a series of strata whose point of veracity is never finally achieved. Echoing William Burroughs, the acutely perceptive Eric Mottram called it the "extreme example of imposed control".
10. I err, I deviate, I touch the nerves of slaves and buffoons. Are these words those of a composite monster pressed into service in the pages of M R James, or a pathological maxim unearthed during one of those archaeological expeditions for which T G Lethbridge is so justifiably celebrated? In any case, they enter into the play of the imagination like a paper plate skinned across a stagnant pond by a child whose only wish is a magic wand to enable his escape from the sun's final decline. Poe's implausible stories have the feel of the real, as do those of James, and surely too those of the dismally chatty chapters on Gorley penned by Harry 'The Conjurer' Price. The bending door, preceded by the heroine tuning in to the ghostly whispers of weeping revenants in The Haunting, similarly strikes a resonant chord.

11. As Jeff Nuttall observed at the very beginning of his curiously name-spattered Bomb Culture, "It is an encouraging fact that the established press in England are perpetually invalidating their own intentions by assuming that whatever has not been articulated does not exist. " How closely this echoes B Traven, in another age, in another frame, on another page. But conversely, as Christopher Booker, another commentator on the 1960s, writes, there are those 'bright young stereotyped faces which played so important a part in the powerful new presence of advertising'. This is the dialectic of the corporate-driven world in sum, viz, that which is not reported by the media literally cannot be thought by those who subscribe to the pathetically compressed 'worldview' it deigns to unfold before them, whilst that which is seen everywhere, poured out everywhere is the stereotype, 'the word repeated without any magic'.

12. "She fixes, flies like a ghost which, having given us some sort of happiness whilst it remained with us, leaves nothing but disquiet in its wake..." And so to trail out, to disintegrate, to dissolve into the absence of volume, the remainder but a dozen times a dozen signs practised in a neat network of repetitions, haunted by a fistful of footnotes. "I have a shelf of you", she said, and at the time I was glad to hear it. Impossible paradox of, to paraphrase W S Graham, blinding words away, it will be just these very words that remain as pointers to certain practical perceptions, to actual facts. Just then, an unexpected incident with far-reaching repercussions occurred, its effects extending well beyond its apparent triviality: the moment of an inadvertently split drink, the pages of The Seduction of Peter S now stained forever.

Notes from the Black Box:
References and Allusions


