

To Live Without Dead Time: An Inquiry into Political Art and the Art of Political Struggle

by Elliot J. Aronow

It has been argued by cultural conservatives that those who wish to stand outside of society have no place in participating in its political processes and policies. The underlying assertion behind this mode of reasoning is that those who are actively engaged in the normative political culture are best suited to make sure that it operates smoothly and effectively. To those who have a vested interest in maintaining the hegemony of one political party or ideological line above all others, this reductionist logic holds true. This argument, however, makes several false assumptions regarding both the nature of politics and the character of the political arena. With every regime or "democratic" government that has risen to power, there have also existed groups and movements that were opposed to the limited and farcical choices offered to them by the status quo. Many of these groups have included in their ranks artists, writers and pockets of middle class bohemians; university educated intellectuals, born to reap the benefits of a system they later swore to destroy. This particular sector of radicals and social outcasts has provided the twentieth century with scores of political critiques that have extended beyond the confines of parliamentary walls into the streets and bedrooms of those living under stifling conditions of advanced capitalism. Using the Surrealists, the

often-mystified Situationist International, and the punk movement of the late seventies as a few key points of departure, this essay plans to explicate the relation that exists between the modern capitalist state and the artistic movements that have examined its influence on the consumption and production of art.

The tension that exists between the individuated artist and their relation to society can be explored through an examination of the avant-garde, and its relation to both the political and artistic realms. In his essay on the avant-garde, Peter Burger asserts " the preposition *avant* means not, at least not primarily, the claim to be in advance of contemporary art, but rather to be at the peak of social progress" (Burger 186). It is this envisioning of a more tolerant and progressive world that allows for the expansion and realization of authentic experiences and desires that serves as the locus of the avant-garde as a movement. Thus, avant-garde art posits working towards its utopian goals above the actual pieces of artwork that an artist may produce (Burger 186). Inherent to this notion of placing intent over product is the idea of socially and politically radicalizing both the subject matter and the production of art.

In regard to the production of avant-garde art, Burger argues that "the artist's activity is avant-gardist not in the production of a new work, but because the artist intends with his work (or the renunciation of a work) something else: the realization of a utopia or the 'multiplication' of progress" (Burger 186). In sharp contrast to traditional ideas of progress which claim that technology and science will be the central forces in bringing about sweeping societal

changes, the avant-garde views the progress of political and cultural institutions as being predicated on the application of art and creative impulses to the quotidian. Thus, the aim of avant-garde groups, such as the Surrealists, the SI, and later on, the punk movements, is to engage, (through the enterprise of art and literature), in a critique of modern society that extends beyond the confines of academic or artistic circles and into the streets, where it can be realized and applied through various artistic mediums. More specifically, this critique is predicated on a reexamination of traditional notions of progress, capitalism and even the enterprise of art itself.

While all three aforementioned groups share a utopian vision (to varying degrees), they also demand that art speak to the political and social realities that have come to frame (and dominate) modern society. In accordance with this statement, Burger makes the claim that the avant-garde movements “share the questioning of the autonomy of art, for example, a protest against an art that has removed itself from life praxis” (Burger 187). Praxis, in the Marxist sense, can be defined as the union and application of theory to practice (Burger 187). Thus, if avant-garde artists are to privilege the intentions of their art above their actual works (which Burger views as being key to the movement), they must apply their theories to their practices. To the avant-garde, art must reflect a critique of society and work towards offering new outlets for both political and artistic avenues through the application of theory to practice (Burger 177). In accordance with this, critique must be applied to all aspects of society, including social, political and artistic apparatuses. This attention to a totalizing critique of society allows avant-gardists to examine not only

the validity of their own work as a piece of radical art (which can be explored through a questioning of its "autonomy"), but also its relation to the systems of the world that operate around it (Burger 187). Thus, to frame one's critique around one particular issue is to ignore the world-view that the status quo has created, that of a fragmented and alienating society that is held together by false notions of social progress and universality (the two tenets of post-Enlightenment capitalism).

If one is to transform a world that has served to truncate and limit possibility and experience, they must examine the structures and relations that constitute life (and the enterprise of art) itself. Thus, to the avant-garde artist, it is "the question is of revolutionizing life, not of creating forms that are destined to become the object of aesthetic contemplation" (Burger 168). Thus, avant-garde art is not to be judged on its aesthetic value (i.e. This is a pretty picture, I like the artist's usage of wide brushstrokes), but rather on the intellectual demands it places on the viewer. The notion of engaging art not as a spectator, but as a subjective actor is one that reoccurs throughout the manifestos and theories of the avant-garde. By giving agency to their audiences, avant-gardists have the ability to facilitate a dialogue between producer and "consumer." By demystifying the way in which the public consumes art, avant-gardists hope to bring about greater levels of awareness that can serve to critique the status quo and the institutions that serve to define the contents of one's daily life (Burger 186). Inherent to this project of radicalizing and altering the contents of daily life is a critique of not only political, economic and artistic structures, but also human relations and the forces that create and define those relations. In accordance with

this critique of the modern life on the macro and micro levels, the avant-garde seeks to blend art with subversive political messages in hopes of radically altering normative societal structures such as work, cultural production and leisure.

In his 1977 work, A Cavalier History of Surrealism, Raoul Vaneigem argued: “the Surrealists invoked the desired unity of poetry, love and revolt” (Vaneigem 50). While these elements appear to be mutually exclusive and even mismatched as far as any coherent political critique is concerned, it was the project of the Surrealists (and their ideological and artistic offspring) to show how the politics of art and desire could be realized, so as to achieve liberation from the mechanized world of advanced capitalism and Party politics (Vaneigem 55). Confronted by the dark realities of Stalinism and the false promises of the Soviet Revolution of 1917, which had transfigured the Bolsheviks into an exceedingly hierarchical bureaucracy, the Surrealists sought to engage in a project that privileged “the desires of the individual above the goals of a formal political party” (Vaneigem 52). Through the embracement of “the human passions, the will to live and the violence of individual demands,” the Surrealists sought to add a new vitality to politics and revolution that was predicated on radical individualism and in opposition to the rigidity of Marxist-Leninist ideology (Vaneigem 37). Using Burger’s view that avant-garde art seeks to join itself to the political struggle in hopes of transforming society as a reference point, the Surrealists can thus be considered an avant-garde movement, in that their intentions focus on applying art to the project of radicalizing the quotidian.

Drawing from the avant-garde's tradition of revolutionizing daily life and creating autonomous art, radical thinker, artist and writer Guy Debord asserted: "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ones" (Debord 145). While this statement may be construed as a simple call for artistic theft without any rhyme or reason, implicit within it is the idea that art and politics are intrinsically linked to one another. To create art under traditional modes of production is to further propagate the hegemony of the status quo, thus one must refuse taking part in the "economy" of art and steal artistic artifacts from the past and make old images undertake new meanings. Echoing Burger's claim that avant-garde art posits intention over product, Debord and the Situationists looked to imbue old products (symbols of the repressive world of industrial capitalism) with new intentions (Marcus 168). Rather than creating new works of consumable art that could be sold, purchased and critiqued in the form of a commodity, the Situationists sought to replace the "false ideas" of capitalism with "correct" ones which posited personal autonomy and creative control over profit making and the demands of the market.

The most general and accessible definition of the Situationist International can be found in Greil Marcus' 1989 book, Lipstick Traces. In the introductory portion of his text, Marcus states that the Situationist International, (or SI), first organized in 1952 as the Lettrist International, and refounded in 1957 at a conference of European avant-garde artists as the Situationist International (Marcus 18). In sharp reaction to Orthodox Marxists and the crimes

committed in the name of Communism by Stalin and his ilk, the Situationists sought to offer a critique not only of leftist politics, but of art, leisure and conditions which constitute everyday material life. In his work, the Society of the Spectacle, author Guy Debord, a key figure in the SI, argues that capitalist society has served to create new relations between individuals (Debord 2). Furthermore, it is these new relations that have come to define not only the economic sphere, but daily life itself. Marcus adds that to the Situationists, "life is no longer lived, but experienced through a system of images and relations placed on the individual by the advanced capitalist state" (Marcus 299). Debord refers to this system of relations as "the spectacle." He continues: "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 12). Using this working definition of the spectacle (that of a relation that is governed by images), one can see how the SI's radical approach to politics crossed over into their theories on art and reclaiming daily life from the spectacle.

A chief tenet of Situationist thought is the notion of "detournement." Marcus, in his exposition of situationist tactics, argues that *detournement* is "the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one's own device" (Marcus 168). Debord adds that *detournement* is way by which to undermine the authority that an image initially held, through a removal of "a fragment or quotation from its context" (Debord 146). A prime example of *detournement* which was carried out by the SI during the late nineteen sixties was the marking up of public spaces with various pieces of graffiti. Included in the

SI program of detouring was a critique of modern capitalist society, ranging from a parody of boredom offered by the spectacle ("Boredom is always counter-revolutionary") to a critique of the farcical notions of vacation and leisure ("Club Med- A Cheap Holiday in Other People's Misery") (Marcus 31). While an advert for a vacation spot (depicting a safe haven removed from the grind of selling one's labor day in and day out) could provide the illusion of financial security, happiness and personal fulfillment, it could also portray the realities of misery, poverty and boredom after it had been painted over with various incendiary words and slogans that were intended to alarm the public. This tactic of adding new (previously hidden) meanings to objects and public spaces with the intention of spreading radical political ideas can be found in Situationist graffiti, which served to baffle police and university students alike throughout the SI's existence.

Unlike convention art, which specifies an individual artist or group of artists as the producers of a specific piece, Situationist artwork remained intentionally anonymous in the public sphere. Situationist art rejects the idea of the artist as a hierarchically stratified mouthpiece for an official movement or party. Within Situationist theory is the idea that there is no authentic voice, no one figure who can be singled out and brought under control by the normative culture. Thus, each artist could maintain what Burger calls their "autonomy," due to the fact that since no one author claimed responsibility of a detoured piece, the flow of ideas ran from the artist directly to the public, without any mediation or criticism from the spectacle (Burger 186). To the SI, art was to be removed from the gaze of bourgeois gallery patrons and brought to the street, where those who

can derive new meanings and interpretations from its puns and slogans could view it. This method of disseminating radical political thought directly to the public is best exemplified in the SI's street campaigns, which included graffiti and the wheat pasting of detoured images (Marcus 170). One piece that stands out in particular is the phrase "NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS" (Never Work) that had adorned the walls of the rue de Seine for months on end in the early fifties to late sixties. By vandalizing the symbols of the spectacle, such as university buildings and advertisements, the SI allowed for their radical politics to be joined to the artistic practices.

Author Thomas McDonough echoes this process of radicalizing art through aesthetic theft and detournement. He argues, "It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. In order for their elaboration to be artistic in the new and authentic sense defined by the S.I., the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art"(McDonough 26). In accordance with their anti-capitalist leanings, the SI never sold nor displayed their art in formal settings, but rather opted to vandalize the symbols of a repressive culture through graffiti and wheat pasting (Marcus 55). This artistic practice undermined notions of the artist as a producer in the realm of the commodity and instead asserted that the artist and the revolutionary could be one and the same. In his essay on Situationist Guy Debord, author Mario Perniola states:

In an age in which ambitious people are ready to do everything to obtain political power and money, Debord's strategy exploits one factor: the admiration he inspires in those who see that political

power and money are secondary to excellence and its recognition. This strategy aims at a kind of superiority similar to that of some of the ancient philosophers, like Diogenes, for whom coherence between principles and behavior was essential (Perniola 19).

This statement parallels Burger's assertion that the connection of ideology with practice in its explication of the Situationists' renunciation of money, prestige, critical acclaim or formal recognition. In accordance with this tenet of the avant-garde, the Situationists asserted that the political realm could not be divorced from the artist realm, due to the all-encompassing nature of the spectacle. This marriage of politics and art lead many to criticize the SI, claiming that their political critiques did not amount to much, due to their status as an art movement, while members of the art world condemned their propagandistic "street art." Former Situationists T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith eloquently frame this critique of Debord and the SI in their essay "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International:"

The denial by Debord and his supporters of any separation between artistic and political activity . . . led in effect not to a new unity within Situationist practice but to a total elimination of art except in propagandist and agitational forms. . . . Theory displaced art as the vanguard activity, and politics (for those who wished to retain absolutely clean hands) was postponed till the day when it would be placed on the agenda by the spontaneous revolt of those who executed rather than gave orders (Clark/Smith 16).

This brings into question Burger's claim that the avant-garde seeks to examine not only the autonomy of art (in terms of its production and consumption), but also its

relation to "life praxis," that is to say, the process of connecting one's political beliefs to their everyday existence. In opposition to their critics, the SI saw art and revolution as being interrelated, in that if one is to undermine the power of the spectacle, they must take part in as few of its processes as possible. Thus the liberation of art from the realm of the commodity can be viewed as a radical act in and of itself. To resist the market (which to say the spectacle) is to undermine its ends of means of domination (falsified images and representations). Furthermore, to raise the stakes of the revolutionary project, the SI argued that the spectacle had to be turned against itself, through the practice of *detournement* and aesthetic plagiarism (Marcus 168). Its tools of manipulation would need to be transfigured into a gun pointed at its own head. This notion of using the spectacle's resources against itself to shed light on the ever-increasing influence of the image on modern thought is one which pervades most Situationist works. This parallels Burger's claim that the avant-garde project is predicated on fostering a union between radical art with "life praxis" and the destruction of art that does not speak to the realities of daily existence, be it social or political (Burger 168). Thus, the SI and their avant-gardist successors sought to breathe new life into what had become a sterile artistic discourse through the process of recontextualizing images to serve politically specific ends.

In accordance with this view that the mediated image can be manipulated and transfigured to create new meanings, author John Berger asserts: "The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is

who uses that language for what purpose." (Berger 33). Echoing Debord's assertion that fragments can be removed from their contexts to reveal new or hidden meanings, Berger's argument states that artistic autonomy can be achieved through using "language for a purpose." Once examined from this perspective, one can see how various groups, such as the SI, adopt Burger's claim that avant-garde art posits intention and autonomy over the authority of a finished product (Burger 170). This notion of reclaiming art from the hands of those gifted enough to be deemed "artists" by society with the intention of radicalizing and altering old paradigms is one that pervades the aesthetic and musical aspects of punk rock.

Like the SI, punk rock sought to offer an alternative to the boredom and drudgery of modern existence. Facets of youth culture, such as fashion, drugs and most importantly, rock and roll, had been watered down and made into cute parodies of what had once been a thriving locus for rebellion and anti-authoritarianism. Faced with the choice between disco and arena rock acts such as Boston and Kansas (as well as other bands named after various American locales), many adolescents began to feel they were somehow "being cheated and exploited for their disposable incomes" (Marcus 6). Rock music had ceased to tap into the feelings of anger, aggression, sexuality and anti-authoritarianism that had been expressed in the works of Elvis, Chuck Berry, the Velvet Underground and countless others during the 1960's. As opposed to speaking to what Burger refers to as "life-praxis," artists sought to separate their work from the everyday and instead focus on the notion of being professional showmen (Burger 170). In reaction to this falsified and alienating rock world, built on

elaborate stage shows and laser light effects, small, localized scenes, comprised of a few people who knew each other (much like the Lettrist and SI) started in London, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Among the key groups in this nascent punk scene were the Sex Pistols. This reaction to the clichés and restrictive paradigms of rock music allowed for punk to take “a load of old ideas and sensationalize them into new feelings” (Marcus 77).

Sharing a pre-thematic and unrealized kinship with the SI, the Pistols sought to introduce a new vocabulary to the banal landscape they were told to accept and uphold. With that, singer Johnny Rotten of the Pistols exclaimed, “I am an antichrist /I am an anarchist/ Don’t know what I want/ But I know how to get it/ I wanna destroy passerby!” (Sex Pistols LP). Never before in a pop song did someone speak with that much venom and contempt for the status quo. To the large corporation which had manufactured the latest acts and groups, pop music was intended as a way to produce and sell inoffensive and easily reproducible acts that could serve to drain adolescents of some money while they politely bobbed their well groomed heads. As the Situationists had asserted, the art generated by the Spectacle serves to perpetuate it, thus creating an infinite cycle (Debord 65).

Punk, however, looked to go beyond the cycle, and as the Situationists had begged “Demand the Impossible” (Marcus 26). By using conventional methods of dispersing music, such as major record labels and television shows, punk bands were able to put forth ideas and images which had been previously non-existent in the realm of pop music. In a brilliant showing of how a shocking piece of “street

art" can "move units," the Sex Pistols engaged in a *detournement* of their own.

In an attempt to garner publicity, the Sex Pistols distributed promotional flyers around London depicting a portrait of the Queen Elizabeth. The portrait shows a smiling queen, sporting a full head of permed hair and the royal crown. If left alone, this would be a rather conventional publicity shot of her Royal Highness, a simple, flattering image designed to instill patriotic values in the hearts and minds of British youth. Recognizing the iconic status of the Queen, the Pistols detoured this potent image, thus entirely changing its meaning. Inserted into the border of the photo (so as to frame the Queen's smiling face) were the lyrics to the Pistols newest single "God Save the Queen/She ain't no Human Being." Accompanying this textual addition was a safety pin, inserted into the Queen's lips. Through this *detournement*, the smiling, gracious and elegant queen has become transfigured into a hapless dolt and a parody of her status as a national and global figurehead is created. The suggestion then made by this image is that the queen's status is not divine or even earned, it stands as a symbol of the class inequalities and social hierarchies that England was/is plagued by. By calling attention to the mediated image (the gracious and dignified Queen) of the Queen and then attaching another meaning to it than was originally intended, the Pistols managed to merge their political critique with a common piece of art, a handbill for a concert. Through this colonization of everyday materials, one could speak to the realities of daily life and offer new critiques of the status quo.

In accordance with the avant-garde impulse to renounce art that does not speak to daily life (for example, the corporate puppets of apolitical, recycled rock and roll), punk bands sought to add new dimensions to pop music that radically veered away from the traditional topics found in conventional music. As opposed to singing about a lost (heterosexual) love, or universal peace and understanding, the lyrics of punk songs spoke to the harsh realities of life under advanced capitalism. Paralleling the Situationist slogan "Club Med- A Cheap Holiday in Other People's Misery," which was used to detourne various billboards around Paris, the group Gang of Four stated, "... the problem of leisure/ what to do for pleasure?" Once removed from its status of "musical vacation for the masses," punk rock asked its viewers to rethink the world that they told to accept since they were school children (Marcus 264). While it is highly unlikely that punk audiences were well versed in the musings of cultural theorists, one cannot deny there exists a connection between the high philosophy of Burger, Debord and the SI and young British malcontents who vocalized and articulated the grievances of a youth culture struggling with economic uncertainty and cultural ennui. By detourning images that were intended to foster patriotism and loyalty (such as picture of a national heroine), the possibility of creating alternative readings of tradition and history could be realized.

Evident in all three avant-garde groups is the belief that a union between art and politics can serve as the locus of power in the creation of a new world. Inherent to this notion of creating a new world is the idea that the enterprise of art must engage in an active critique of the

normative aspects of capitalist society. To the SI the most viable avenue for disseminating what could potentially be an overly rigorous radical academic discourse was to intentionally undermine the authority of the image by co-opting it for their own purposes. Evident of this calculated approach to radicalizing the populace was the SI's deliberate placement of easily accessible radical slogans on university walls and commercial billboards that could be gazed upon by any social subject who happened to pass by. This notion of making radical art accessible to the public through a co-optation of the familiar was, unbeknownst to the SI, later espoused by the punk movement. By working within what had come to be a trivial and superficial forum for the arts (the commercial music industry), acts like the Sex Pistols were able to find an avenue for their radical program by making their ideas palpable to the public through their stripped down, aggressive music and intentionally subversive promotional techniques. By remaining answerable to their fans and denying that they were pop superstars, the Pistols were able to destroy the traditional hierarchies found in pop music, which had served to create a barrier between the artist and their fans. Rather than flaunt their status as popular musicians, the Pistols renounced it and with it, the alienated world of capitalism that it had come to reflect. Using the foundation laid by the Surrealists, the SI and the punk movement as a set of working reference points, it can be asserted that in order to remain effective agents of social change, the artist must seek to create (or steal) artistic artifacts that speak to the realities of political struggle and resistance. It is through this application of artistic production to life praxis that art can

work towards the “multiplication of progress”, both artistic and political, that Burger describes.

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