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## CRITICAL PRACTICE: ART, INTERVENTION AND POWER

A paper begun in 2001. Extended forms of the argument, and references to past and present art practices, are in *Urban Avant-Gardes* (Routledge, 2004).

### INTRODUCTION

This text interrogates the question as to whether art can change the world, by examining the concept of an avant-garde, beginning with Realism in France in the mid nineteenth century. It notes points of coincidence between Realism and Marxism, suggests the legacy of Realism in a range of realisms, and asks whether a dichotomy between realism and abstraction is false. It then identifies problems in the concept of an avant-garde, questioning the privileged position of the artist as interpreter of the world, and autonomy claimed for modern art, as reflections of a modern concept of the subject, since overtaken by insights in postmodern discourses.

Ernesto Laclau, in a footnote to an essay dissecting the classical concept of emancipation, writes:

... the quest for an absolute freedom for the subject is tantamount to a quest for an unrestricted dislocation and the total disintegration of the social fabric. It also means that a democratic society which has become a viable social order will not be a totally free society, but one which has negotiated in a specific way the duality of freedom/unfreedom (Laclau, 1996: 19, n2).

Is the artist free? Or is art practice part of the negotiation? Seeking to recover something from the project of the avant-garde, I argue for a possibility for art as a critical practice which, like critical theory, questions its own assumptions, operating within the dominant society to reveal contradictions.

### 1. AVANT-GARDES: THE METHODOLOGIES OF INTERVENTION

Linda Nochlin begins an essay on the avant-garde in nineteenth-century France by citing Theophile Thoré, a critic during the 1848 revolution in Paris and admirer of Courbet and Millet: "Art changes only through strong convictions, convictions strong enough to change society at the same time." (Nochlin, 1968: 3). Writing in 1855 in exile, Thoré does not say that art changes the world. The sentence could mean that changes in art and society derive from common conditions, yet the implication is that new ideas produce new kinds of art which have a social impact. So, Henri de Saint-Simon writes in 1825,

It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde ... the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties ... (in Nochlin, 1968: 5).

And the Fourierist critic Charles Laverdant, in 1845,

Art, the expression of society, manifests ... the most advanced social tendencies; it is the forerunner and the revealer. (in Nochlin, 1968: 6).

From which he asserts that the effectiveness of art can be seen only when the direction of humanity is known. But how? Orthodox Marxism asserts, from a Hegelian model, that freedom is the objectively given end of history. Struggle is necessary for its accomplishment but the direction of progress is an upward

movement of the base in the social pyramid. Darwinism argues in contrast that change is adaptation to conditions, and does not imply a given end.

Seeking a means appropriate to its project, Realism in France in the mid nineteenth century is a new pictorial language. Substituting a subject-matter of everyday life for the mythologies of neo-classicism, using an accessible manner of representation, and employing a democratic rather than hierarchic pictorial organisation, Realism states as well as illustrates a society of universal suffrage, which was declared briefly in Paris in 1848. At the same time, it does not question the status of the artist as revealer of this new world of which art provides a glimpse, a contradiction which perhaps contributes to why histories of the avant-garde make less gloomy reading for those in power than for those who make them.

The revolution of 1848 was followed by the coup of 1851, Louis Napoleon's proclamation as Emperor Napoleon III, a reduction of the breadth of voting rights, and a period of intense censorship of the arts; then the defeat at Sedan and suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. Courbet was arrested for his role in the destruction of the Vendôme Column during the Commune, taken with other Communards to a temporary prison in the stables at Versailles, and later charged with the cost of the column's re-erection. After a period of imprisonment he died in Switzerland in 1877. One of his last paintings was *Grand Panorama of the Alps* (1877, Cleveland Museum of Art) which he hoped to exhibit at the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition; but a further shift to the right in French politics ended any prospect of rehabilitation. Tim Clark writes that after Courbet's exile politicised artists maintained a low profile, Pissarro fleeing to England, and Manet remaining non-committal in a drawing of the barricades: "He suppressed the action; he kept the faces out of focus" (Clark, 1973: 182). Three years after the end of the Commune the first Impressionist exhibition took place in Paris.

The revolutions of society were replaced as subject-matter for art by those of optics, though there is a radical vision in Seurat's world of leisure for all classes by the Seine in his *Bathers at Asnières* (1884, National Gallery, London). But, before its encapsulation in history, what did Realism say? For instances in Courbet's *The Studio* (1855, Louvre), or *The Burial at Ornans* (1851, Louvre) which Clark calls "the best image of the 1848 revolution" (Clark, 1973: 181). *The Studio* depicts the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier, a democratic, communitarian society of de-centralised, self-sufficient *phalanstères*, each of about 1,600 people of graduated levels of wealth, age and knowledge (Beecher and Bienvenu, 1971; Buber, 1996: 18-21; Nochlin, 1968: 10-18). *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of my Artistic Life*, to use its full title, is a Fourierist tract. On one side are artisans, on the other intellectuals and patrons, including Baudelaire. Courbet is the fulcrum of the composition, artist as worker and thinker embodying the Fourierist concept of Harmony, while the picture as a whole declares a unity of capital, labour and talent. It may also reveal disillusionment in the inclusion, possibly, of Napoleon III in the left foreground - the man with dogs, author of left-leaning pamphlet (*De l'extinction de paupérisme*) in 1844 but terminator of the hope of 1848 (Touissant, 1978: 265-6). This figure, added at a late stage, sits in front of revolutionaries such as Herzen, Garibaldi, and a veteran of 1789. The composition, however, transcends immediacy in a structure denoting Fourier's system of correspondences in the natural and human sciences, again locating Courbet at the centre: Fourier's four affective passions of Friendship, Love, Ambition and Family Feeling relate to four ages of Childhood, Adolescence, Maturity and Age, but there is a fifth, pivotal age of Virility between Love and Ambition, from 36 to 45 - Courbet was 36 in 1855 (Nochlin, 1968: 14-15). As Nochlin writes, Courbet's work is avant-garde in its "etymological derivation, as implying a union of the socially and the artistically

progressive" and "a concrete emblem of what the making of art and the nature of society are to the Realist artist" (Nochlin, 1968: 17). At the same time, it is a highly coded work, in contrast to *The Burial at Ornans*, which appears a straightforward portrait of the emerging rural middle class.

Marx had contact with a Fourierist group in Paris in 1843:

you would have to attend one of the meetings of the French workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which burst forth from these toil-worn men (cited in Geoghegan, 1987: 25, 143 n20).

Marx may romanticise this freshness. The same nobility of toil is the sentiment of Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* (1849, destroyed 1945), painted in Ornans in the aftermath of 1848. The two figures, one young and upright the other old and bent, state a paradoxical dignity and destructiveness of manual work and the ageing it inscribes on the body. Seurat, in small sketches leading to the *Bathers*, depicts agricultural labourers and urban youth, and in 1882-3, painted *The Stone Breaker* (Phillips Collection, Washington DC), lending support to readings of his work as politicised.

The outcome of Marx's reflection is the philosophy of practice sketched in eleven, short *Theses on Feuerbach* in a notebook in Brussels in 1845. Thought and action are integrated in a dialectical materialism which has resonance with Courbet's adherence to the real:

painting ... can only consist of the representation of *real and existing things*. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting (Courbet, 1861, in Nochlin, 1966: 35).

While for Marx,

The chief defect of ... materialism ... is, that the object, reality, which we apprehend through our senses, is understood only in the form of the *object of contemplation* but not as *sensuous human activity, as practice*, not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the active side was developed abstractly by idealism - which of course does not know real sensuous activity as such (Marx, ed. Pascal, 1947: 197).

Courbet and Marx share a concern for human sensuous activity; and what de Certeau (1984) calls the practice of everyday life is seen in Courbet's depiction of everyday subject-matter, while his rejection of abstractions such as Liberty in favour of a concrete actuality, as in *The Burial at Ornans*, is parallel to Marx's rejection of the abstractions of idealism. After 1871, Realism, with the naturalism of nineteenth-century Russian artists such as Repin, informs Socialist Realism as the state style of the USSR - despite a preference for classicism in Marx and his opposition to the Christian realism of the Nazarenes (Rose, 1984: 34-70).

The state budget for experimental art was cut in the economic reform of 1921, making collectors again a necessary support for artists. The Society of Wanderers, of which Repin was the best-known member, was reconstituted and merged with the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia in 1922, before a wider reorganisation of artists' groups as the Soviet Artists' Union, and proclamation of Socialist Realism by the Party Congress, in 1932 (Rose, 1984: 141-24). Socialist Realism was caricatured in the west, yet has breadth - as in the work of Aleksandr Deineka (Bown and Taylor, 1993: 68), though in the work of Gerasimov it falls into institutional portraiture.

Yet if Vladimir Serov's *Peasant Delegates Talking to Lenin* (1950, Tretyakov, Moscow; illustrated Rose, 1984: 152) is like a history lesson, or eating one's greens, and the bronzes craned out of squares in eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 state an outsized rhetoric, there is another legacy of realist languages in media such as documentary photography and film. For Walter

Benjamin, in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin, 1973: 219-254), the lens and the moving image offer a democratic invitation to imagine worlds other than the given, worlds which *might be* rather than which are, in an experience which is part of mass culture rather than the museum. Similarly, for artists such as John Heartfield in the 1930s, or more recently Peter Kennard and John Goto, or groups such as The Art of Change, technologies of the image which re-organise context and produce unexpected juxtapositions - in collage, montage, and digital imaging - take documentation towards critique. Not that it was ever a neutral technology; John Tagg writes that "The camera is never merely an instrument", arguing that its technical limitations and the distortion of the photograph as record "register as meaning; its representations are highly coded; and it wields a power that is never its own" (Tagg, 1988: 150). Realism is in any case transcendent when it states reality not as it is but as it could be. This suggests that, just as Realism is more than a description of the real in offering insight into a real-to-come, a simple dichotomy between realism and the emergent abstraction of German Expressionism does not hold.

The difficulty with abstraction is that it opens a terrain for displacement of hope to an aesthetic realm in which it may be captured, leaving the political world unchanged. Herbert Marcuse writes of an affirmative character of culture in the bourgeois period which produced "the segregation from civilisation of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is considered superior to civilisation" (Marcuse, 1968: 95). This enforces observance of a world which is better but different in kind from that of everyday life, as cultural objects which are celebrated and exalted but affirm ordinary (political) life as at best a time of suffering beneath (as for religion before) art (or the life to come). For the New York artists of the 1940s, following Surrealism, exploration of the psyche is represented by abstraction and becomes non-ideological. As gatekeepers to primordial myth they reveal, not the contradictions of socio-economic organisation, but their own anxieties lent mythological allusions (or titles) and projected on a cosmic scale (Kuspit, 1993). Diana Crane notes that the New York painters of the first generation were "a tiny enclave who perceived themselves as being at odds with the rest of American society and totally isolated" (Crane, 1987: 41) and sees little evidence they saw a public for their work outside a small circle of initiates. Yet isolation, too, is part of a history of the avant-garde: Nochlin writes that, taking the idea broadly:

we must come to the conclusion that what is generally implied by the term begins with Manet rather than Courbet. For implicit - and perhaps central - to our understanding of avant-gardism is the concept of alienation - psychic, social, ontological - utterly foreign to Courbet's approach to art and life (Nochlin, 1968: 18).

But, is the lack of a public for its work the only limitation of the modern avant-garde? For Courbet, a public was created for his work by exhibiting it in Besançon. But for the stylistic revolutions of the twentieth century it is the white cube which becomes a setting for an aestheticism retiring from the world of the street or struggle.

My argument is that the failure of successive avant-gardes revolves around a structural flaw in the concept 'avant-garde' and its assumption of the artist's status as heroic or Promethean revealer.

A work such as *The Studio* relies on coded forms of representation. As Tagg argues, there are no forms of representation, even in photography, which are not coded. It could be added that there is no raw experience, only mediation in consciousness and art, though the codes are specific to their objectives and their currency fluctuates in history. David's narratives of the Roman Republic use

austerity of form as code for a virtuous critique prior to 1789. As a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, he designed uniforms and organised festivals. His functional work has a parallel in the spatial, textile, ceramic and industrial design to which Russian Constructivists turned. But his portraits of the Revolution's dead were moral, images of virtue to encourage virtuous lives, as he says in his remarks on the painting of Michel Lepelletier de Saint-Fargeau, a member of the Convention assassinated in 1793:

I shall have fulfilled my task if my picture will some day cause an aged father to speak thus to his numerous family assembled around him:  
'Come, children, look at the Representative who was the first to die in order that you might have Liberty ... (David, in Eitner, 1971: 133).

The attitude derives from Rousseau. In the nineteenth century art's educative role is employed by reformists as well as revolutionaries, the establishment of public museums and art galleries from the 1840s being a means to tame the lower orders and incorporate them into liberal society.

Taste is the preserve of connoisseurs. Ability to interpret visual codes affirms the power of the educator-artist. The problem of the avant-garde, then, is less the gap between concept and actuality when the concept of the world as it ought to be becomes aestheticised, than that such anticipatory representations entail interpretation. If neo-classical narratives stating a harmony of order in the sense of a given, as if natural, hierarchy require an educated audience for their reception, so allegory in realism, in *The Studio*, also requires interpretation to be fully understood, as the brief analysis above begins to indicate; but also, the greater difficulty is that to reveal the world as it might be, whether as romantic genius or Nietzschean tightrope-walker suspended above the mass public, is an act of interpretation, and means the world is interpreted for others who, it is assumed, cannot interpret it *for themselves*. John Roberts writes,

Political art ... assumes that those whom the artwork is destined for (the fantasized working class) need art in as much as they need Ideas in order to understand capitalism ... There is never a moment's recognition that people are already engaged in practices ... which are critical and transformative (Roberts, 2001: 6).

To which one response is Joseph Beuys' idea that everyone is an artist. And another Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of a dialogic culture, or culture as a socially creative force (Bell, 1998), a heterotopia. In postmodernity, meaning is no longer interpretation because there is no meta-statement to interpret. For Barthes, in *Empire of Signs* (1972) all that can be addressed is "the possibility of a difference" (Barthes, 1972: 3). In a system of difference, meanings shift, enabling intervention in both case and category without setting them in a hierarchy, and categories are re-defined by cases which belong to them only in as much as they belong to each other; and even if - it is said - the reader completes the text by reading it, there is no completion. For Bakhtin,

The word does not the utterance from a dictionary, but from life, from utterance to utterance (Bakhtin M and Medvedev P N, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, 1991, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, p122, cited in Sandywell, 1998: 196).

So: "the concept of language-in-use" ... [is] an unfinalizable dialogic process (Sandywell, 1998: 197).

## 2. CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

The idea that art can change the world, then, rests on a number of overlapping assumptions: that the world can be changed in the sense of something done to it by an autonomous subject; that the direction of change can be revealed; and that

the artist is instrumental. Each assumption follows the philosophic culture of the century before last, while objectification, grand narrative, and the artist's claim for special status are now problematic, superseded not only by Bakhtin's society as work-in progress, but also by the work of feminist and post-colonial cultural theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1989) on the gaze, Luce Irigaray (1994) on the gendering of language, Doreen Massey (1994) on the gendering of space, or Gayatri Spivak (1987) on the colonial subject's voice. If, then, identity is constructed, situated in discourse - the point of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* being to reclaim the act of construction in a field of alterity (Foster, 1985: 66-8) - the world, as well as the acting subject, is continuously reconstructed.

For Bacon, the world is disenchanted - freed from Fate - at cost of domination (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 3-5). Where, then, to look for an ending of unfreedom? In his 11th *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx makes the frequently cited statement that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world ... the point is to change it" (Marx, 1947: 199). This responds to a philosophical inversion in which the reflective intellect is the activating principle in Idealism, and thought a passive abstraction of sensory impressions in Materialism. Feuerbach rejects the (Hegelian) world-spirit of idealism in favour of a history produced by circumstances in a world in which thoughts are abstractions of sense impressions - a radical idea in its time, in which change in the person is a product of changes in circumstance - but the problem is that the person seems to have little scope in bringing this about. Marx, seeking a philosophy of practice, translates action to materialism. Ernst Fischer summarises:

The 'philosophy of practice' transfers the active, creative principle from the systems of idealist philosophy into materialism: reality as process, movement, change, and *social reality* as the *intervention* of objective and subjective factors, of *objective* circumstances and human activity (Fischer, 1973: 153).

Reality is conditioning but open to being conditioned. In his 3rd Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx states that though people are changed by a shift in the circumstances of their lives, circumstances, too, can be changed, and "the educator must himself [sic] be educated" (Marx, 1947: 198). As Fischer emphasises, it is not a question of theory or practice but always both:

Philosophy without practice dissolves very easily into air or smoke or congeals into a dogmatic profession of faith; practice without philosophy turns into myopic, mindless practicism (Fischer, 1973: 157).

Critical theory seeks appropriate understandings of past conditions from which to gain insights into future possibilities for change. This is like Freud's formulation of psychoanalysis as enabling the analysand to see repetitions in behaviour as a means to be freed from their domination. Broadly, deriving insights from Marx and Freud, this is the project of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, or International Institute as it was reconstituted at Columbia University, New York in 1935. Max Horkheimer established a foundation for critical theory in an inaugural lecture as Director of the Institute in 1931, 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research' (Horkheimer, 1993: 1-14); and in 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937), published in the Institute's journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Horkheimer sees knowledge as socially produced; he writes of an "interpretation of the vicissitudes of human fate - the fate of humans not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a community" and argues that the material of philosophy "can only be understood in the context of human social life: with the state, law, economy, religion - in short with the entire material and intellectual culture of humanity" (Horkheimer 1993: 1). The limitation of the scientific philosophy of positivism is its isolation of the object of its study from the world, mirrored in a separation of the disciplines through which the world is apprehended. Social philosophy and research give attention to a society's forms of organization through multi-disciplinary enquiry

involving philosophy, sociology, economics, history and psychology (Horkheimer 1993: 9). Critical theory differs from scientific theory also in that scientific theory is instrumental, aiming to manipulate reality in predictable ways - to objectify it - while critical theory seeks liberation through critical reflection, critical of its own assumptions and the conditions in which it is itself produced.

For Marcuse, the events of 1918-19 were formative. Aged 20, a conscript and member of the Social Democratic Party, he was elected as a representative of the soldiers' council for a working-class suburb of Berlin, and posted to Alexanderplatz, rifle in hand, to defend the republic against counter-revolutionaries. Then he joined an independent faction of poets and writers led by Kurt Eisner, who was assassinated following proclamation of a socialist republic in Munich in 1918 (Katz, 1982: 23-34). At the beginning of 1919 the social democrat government allied itself with the deposed military high command. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, leaders of the Spartacus League, later the German Communist Party, were abducted and killed, and in March that year a final surge left 1,200 dead on the pavements of Berlin. Marcuse's return to philosophy in 1919 at Humboldt University, Berlin and later at Freiburg offered a space in which the required reappraisals could be carried out. The subject of Marcuse's doctoral thesis was the German artist-novel (*kunstlerroman*), a genre in which the main character is an artist or writer, and the narrative one of self-discovery through adversity.

The history of critical theory is as gloomy as that of the avant-garde, haunted by the history of Germany in 1918 and 1933. Why had the revolution not succeeded in industrialised Germany? Why the rise of fascism? For Bloch the left's adherence to intellect when the fascists used an emotive millenarianism explained a lack of mass appeal. He sees a fertile ground for fascism in the nostalgia of the provincial *petit-bourgeoisie* (Bloch, 1991: 191-4) and contrasts this with Expressionism, or the potential of montage to convey a world in upheaval. For Bloch and Marcuse, in different ways, abstraction (a term used for Expressionism) is resistant. In Marcuse's later work, aesthetic space becomes critical. Moving away from some of the reflections in his essay, first published in 1937, on 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' (1968), Marcuse, like Adorno, sees aesthetic space as the only place to go in grim times, a last resort in which, free of coercion, the surfaces of the dominant reality can be ruptured - as in a refusal of normative codes of perception. But there is also a difficulty, for Adorno (1997) an *aporia* beyond resolution, between the aesthetic and the social dimensions of culture. On art and suffering, Adorno writes,

The artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of its neutralization of suffering (Adorno, 1997: 39).

After the Holocaust, cultural criticism (*kulturkritik*) is obsolete, its ability to speak corroded when annihilation is subject-matter for artifacts (Adorno, 1981: 33-4). Yet to resolve the difficulty would be a closure, the worst outcome. Adorno (1997) and Marcuse (1978) retain a creative tension:

The demand for complete responsibility on the part of artworks increases the burden of their guilt; therefore this demand is to be set in counterpoint with the antithetical demand for irresponsibility. The latter is reminiscent of an element of play, without which there is no more possibility of art than of theory (Adorno, 1997: 39).

This avoids the reproduction of power relations. It is problematic, as in how the institutions of the old will be abolished before the new arises (Marcuse, 1970: 80). Critical theory offers a process not an end. But what of art? From Marcuse, the point is that if human consciousness can change, then art offers a means to facilitate it. He writes:

... what appears in art as remote from the praxis of change demands recognition as a necessary element in a future praxis of liberation ... Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world (Marcuse, 1978: 32-3).

Which implies a critical practice, in which exposure of contradictions can undermine false authority to open a space in which other stories are told. Writing of the use of spoof newspapers distributed to commuters by the London-based group PLATFORM (for interdisciplinary creativity, ecology and democracy), Jane Trowell sees art as having a "viral quality ... slipping a proposition into the bloodstream under the guise of a safe publication" (Trowell, 2000: 107). PLATFORM's manifesto states,

We use art as a catalyst. This art is not primarily about an aesthetic - it is creativity applied to real situations ... Our working method is grounded in bringing together individuals from different disciplines, who then work collectively, developing an open space for dialogue ... (PLATFORM, Manifesto, 1993).

**Does art work like frost, in the crevices of the dominant society? Power is not confronted, as in revolution, but its categories dissolved.**

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